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The Dream

CHAPTER 1

Miguel's POV

'Where am I?' My eyebrows scrunched as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, taking in my surroundings.

There were buildings all around me, covered in the light of the fading sun. Overgrown weeds towered in front of the old wooden structures, giving what may have once been a beautiful neighborhood a rundown look. Most of the buildings were houses, with nailed-up boards covering the windows and doors, and faded 'for sale' signs just barely visible through the tall grass. However, one small house still looked to be in use, and I could see a light coming from within.

I walked towards it slowly, looking all around me as the wind blew through the plants, making eerie noises that sent shivers up my neck. The sun had set completely by the time I reached the house, and looking at it again I realized how tiny it truly was. It was one-story, looking to only have a few rooms. I bit my lip nervously as I contemplated what I should do for a moment, before knocking.

"Woah!" I exclaimed loudly as my hand went through the rotting wood. I pulled it back quickly, taking sharp, shallow breaths as I tried to figure out what had happened. 'Am I a spirit again...?' My eyes widened as I stared at my fingers in horror. 'The last thing I remember is going to bed.' I tried to recall how I got here, to no avail. 'Maybe someone in there can help me,' I hoped, swallowing the lump in my throat.

A few moments passed before I tentatively raised my hand again, slowly letting my arm pass through the door. It didn't hurt, so I carefully stuck my head through the door as well. I looked around, realizing the place was practically empty. With the light from the full moon shining brightly outside, I could see there was no wood or drapes covering the window. The walls had peeling, yellow paint, and there was nothing that revealed who lived there as far as pictures or paintings went. I could hear voices

coming from somewhere in the house, so I walked through the rest of the door, searching the building for the occupants.

I scurried through the entry room, making my way to the living room. I grimaced at the rotten smell as I walked through the passageway. Glancing around, I noticed an old, ugly-looking couch with a moth-eaten sheet over it, and two large chairs that looked to be used recently, as they were the only objects that didn't have a thick layer of dust. The windows had no covering over them, leaving the wooden ground near them moldy from years of rain. The moonlight cast twisted shadows on the wall, the darkness moving as the trees and plants outside swayed in the wind.

Looking closer at the floor, I could see shoe prints in the dust. There were two paths, one leading back to the front of the house, and the other through a door I could barely make out in the moonlight. 'It must be the bedroom,' I reasoned, as I could hear muffled voices coming from within. I took a deep breath, before reluctantly walking to the closed door, an uneasy feeling stirring in my stomach. I looked behind me one more time, then hesitantly passed through the door.

The voices instantly became clear as I entered the room. I gasped, my eyes widening as I realized who the voices belonged to. "No more, Ernesto," Papá Héctor ordered as he finished packing his bag. "I miss my family. I don't want to spend another day away from them."

*Papá Héctor headed for the door. I jumped when **Ernesto** moved to grab him, a vicious snarl on **his** face. I was about to try to intervene, when **Ernesto** seemed to think better of assaulting Papá Héctor, straightening with a large, fake-looking smile.*

*"Alright, my old amigo. I understand," **he** said with a sympathetic look as Papá Héctor stopped at the door, turning slightly to face **Ernesto**. "You have a beautiful wife to go home to, and a young daughter to raise. Who am I to try to keep you waiting?" The large **man** said with a small, sad chuckle. "Let's have one last toast to our friendship though, that we may part as friends before you go back home." **Ernesto** grinned, but I could see a dark glint in **his** eyes in the lantern's dim light.*

"Of course," Papá Héctor replied with a small smile, setting his suitcase down momentarily.

*"No!" I cried, startled as I watched **Ernesto** pour the drinks, putting a powdery substance in one of them.*

"Don't drink it Papá Héctor!" I shouted, trying to warn him.

*He couldn't hear me though, as he took the drink from **Ernesto** with a smile. I tried to knock it from his hands, to stop him from drinking it, but my hands passed through him and the cup, as if I wasn't even there. I screamed as Papá Héctor drank the poisoned alcohol in a jovial spirit, while **Ernesto** watched him with a wicked smirk. I could do nothing but stare as Papá Héctor set the empty cup down, and they headed to the train station.*

I followed behind, watching as Papá Héctor would occasionally wince, rubbing his stomach. It wasn't until a half hour later, when they had reached the station, that the poison started to complete its job. Papá Héctor's face contorted into a pained grimace as he fell to his knees, clutching his midsection.

*"Are you okay, my friend?" **Ernesto** asked, fanning concern. "Perhaps it was something you ate?"*

*"You lying murderer!" I yelled, glaring at **Ernesto**, before rushing to Papá Héctor's side. His breathing was harsh as he trembled from the pain, small groans coming from his mouth as the poison slowly killed him. I looked around, just realizing that the station was practically empty, and that there was no one to help Papá Héctor. Minutes passed before he passed out from the agony, his breaths growing increasingly labored. Slowly, they came farther and farther apart, until finally, after one last shuddering inhale and exhale, they stopped.*

"No!" I screamed, trying desperately to find some sign that he was still alive somehow.

*"No, this can't be happening, this—this can't." I muttered to myself, pulling my hair harshly with my hands, trying desperately to not fall apart. Tears streamed down my face as I watched **Ernesto** drag Papá Héctor away.*

"No!" I bolted upright with a shout, my heart beating out of my chest.

My eyes darted wildly around the room, searching for hidden enemies. I scrambled off my bed, pushing myself into a corner of the room as I hyperventilated. The shadows danced on the walls as the trees outside shook in the wind, the image eerily similar to what I had seen only moments ago. I pulled my knees to my chest as I tried to forget my dream and focus on the fact that Papá Héctor was fine now, that he was alright, and that Coco had remembered him in time.

I took a shuddery breath, gripping my hair tightly. Tugging at the short black strands, I desperately attempted to calm myself down. My face felt wet, and my clothes were soaked with sweat, though I shivered from an imaginary cold.

"Just a dream," I murmured quietly. "Only a dream."

'It doesn't help that you know it wasn't really just a dream. A long time ago now, a variation of that event did happen.' A voice inside my head whispered, one I was quick to lock up.

Pushing myself up from the floor, I changed into dry pajamas, climbing back into bed. I lay there for several minutes, unable to suppress the urge to continue frantically examining my room. Finally, I sighed, checking the time on my clock.

I grimaced. "How is it only one o'clock...?" I muttered with a groan. I rolled over, knowing that if I wanted to be somewhat functional tomorrow, I'd need more than three hours of sleep. I forced my body to let go of its tension, trying to close my eyes.

As soon as my eyelids fell shut though, I saw Papá Héctor lying on the ground, his glazed eyes open, but unseeing. I winced, my own eyes flying open. I knew it was just a dream, but it felt so real! It'd only been a a couple weeks since Día de los Muertos, and finding out who my great-great-grandfather was. Since that hectic night, I'd had trouble sleeping, whether from horrible nightmares or my mind racing too fast to even bother trying to rest.

It affected other parts of my life, too. I wasn't eating as much, my appetite diminished by my exhaustion probably, and I was having trouble staying awake in school. I knew I should probably try to get

a few more hours of sleep, but try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes and risk returning to the land of horrors that may await me. I contemplated staying here till morning, or going to see if I could crawl into my parent's bed for the night. I frowned as I considered that idea, as I hadn't done anything that childish in years, and it was a habit I thought I'd broken.

'They must be tired. After all, they have little Socorro to look after now. I wouldn't want to be too much of a hassle.' I rolled over in bed, attempting to count sheep jumping over a creek in my head. I slammed my arms against my bed in frustration once I reached 161, and still felt wide awake.

'On the other hand,' I thought, re-examining my previous plan. 'I probably won't get another wink of sleep if I stay here all night.'

Suddenly, thunder crashed outside, making my decision for me. I shrieked, before racing to my parents' room, slowing down slightly so as to not wake up the rest of my familia. Cautiously, I opened their door, being careful not to let it squeak. I tread as silently as I could to their bed, doing my best not to step on any of the creaky boards. Finally, I reached their bed, practically inching my way between them as I attempted not to wake them up. I had almost reached the pillows when I heard a loud squeak come from the mattress below me. I watched in horror as mi padre sleepily opened his eyes, looking at me in confusion for a moment.

"Miguel? What are you doing in our bed?" He asked, turning the bedside lamp on, the dim glow waking up mi madre as well.

"Why are you here?" she asked as she rubbed her eyes groggily, sitting up slightly in bed to look at me better.

"I just...uh..." I whispered quietly, trying to say I'd had a nightmare, but in a way that didn't make me look like a complete baby for running to my parents after a bad dream.

"Miguel," mi padre began gently. "You're getting too old for this. We love you, but we need our sleep as well, especially with the baby now."

I looked down at the blanket, fiddling absentmindedly with a loose string on the hem of my shirt. I bit my lip, trying to hold back tears as I realized I probably wouldn't be allowed to stay. It hurt, but I knew he was right. They didn't have time to deal with me. I was just being a nuisance.

"Miguel, we love you." Mi madre said, choosing her words carefully. "It's just the baby needs us more than you do right now, and you have to be a big boy, and not come running to us because of storms."

I opened my mouth, about to tell her that wasn't the problem, before shutting it so quickly my teeth clicked. 'Even if that isn't the problem, it doesn't matter. She doesn't need to know that I actually had a nightmare, that I woke up terrified, looking all around and checking, and double checking, and triple checking to make sure I was truly alone, making sure that **he** wasn't there, that **he** wasn't going to try to poison me, or—'

"Sí, Mamá." I muttered as I looked up at her, mustering up the biggest smile I could.

She softly cupped my cheek with the palm of her hand, kissing my forehead. Mi padre hugged me, and I slowly crawled off the bed, shuffling off to my room. Sighing deeply, I rubbed my eyes, feeling like my room was a kilometer away. After what felt like an hour, I opened my door, fearfully glanced around the room before running to my bed and diving under the covers.

'I know it's stupid, to be so terrified of something I know couldn't possibly be there.' I pursed my lips as I looked around my room once more. Lightning struck outside, and I flinched as the light briefly illuminated the corners previously shadowed in darkness.

'I can't help it though! The nightmare, and what happened on Día de los Muertos, I...I can't seem to close my eyes for a moment, without seeing **him** in my mind's eye. If only I could sleep in my parents' bed, just for a few hours.' I lamented, my eyes flickering to the door. 'Maybe if I just explain—no. They have bigger things to worry about than some baby 12-year-old who had a bad dream about a dead guy! Besides, they wouldn't understand anyways, they

weren't there.' I thought dejectedly, attempting to get comfortable in bed.

'Face it,' a creature deep inside of me whispered, with a voice like nails on a chalkboard. 'Your parents have a baby now. They don't need you. They'll forget all about you, just you wait. It'll start small, sure. No more good night hugs or kisses, forgetting to wake you up in the mornings, things like that. Soon enough though, they'll forget they even had a second kid!' It hissed, filling me with despair.

"No!" I muttered hoarsely, violently shaking my head against the ridiculous notion of being forgotten. "My parents love me!"

I tried to close my eyes and push away all the doubts and worries in my head. 'And—' I looked at the window pane, watching the rain beat against it. 'They always will...right?'

School

I tried to find out as much information about what school in Mexico is like, but if you have gone to Mexican school, and my information is incorrect, please let me know in the comments below so I can change it. Happy father's day!:)

Miguel's POV

I ended up not getting any more sleep, mostly because I was too scared to close my eyes for any time period longer than a minute. I waited in bed for my parents to wake me up like they usually do at 6:45 or so, but when it reached 7:15 on my clock, I realized they probably forgot to make sure I was up for school. It wouldn't be that unusual, as they'd done it before, though it'd been becoming a more and more regular thing.

'They're forgetting you,' a dark voice whispered gleefully in my mind. 'No!' I shook my head vehemently as I got dressed for school. I put on my school uniform, which consisted of an uncomfortable white dress shirt with a black tie, as well as an itchy red vest to go over it that had my school's emblem on it, and black pants. I looked at the small hand-held mirror I had in my room, trying to tame the rat's nest I called my hair. Giving up after a couple minutes, I quickly pulled on my old black jacket, walking out of my bedroom. I hurried to the bathroom, grinning when I found it was empty, a very rare sight in the morning for a family as big as mine. I brushed my teeth and then ran down the stairs to breakfast.

"Ay, Miguel! No running in the house!" Scolded Abuelita. "Sorry," I smiled sheepishly at her as I sat down, watching as she piled too much food onto my plate.

I looked for my parents, realizing with a frown that they weren't there. "Where are Papá and Mamá?" I asked, cutting up my food into small pieces, so it would look like I'd eaten when I really hadn't. I felt bad, tricking my Abuelita into thinking I'd eaten, but I really wasn't hungry. Just the thought of food made me nauseous.

"They're taking care of Coco," said Rosa as she ate her breakfast slowly, one hand supporting her head as she brought her fork to her mouth with her other.

"Your parents are very busy these days with the baby. You can't expect them to spend the same amount of time with you as before." Aunt Gloria gently reminded me.

"I...I know," I muttered, looking down as I pushed the food on my plate around some. "I...was just going to say good morning to them." I lied, glancing up at my aunt with a weak smile. She didn't need to know about all of my childish insecurities.

I fought back a sigh as I gave the excuse that I had to get to school early to ask a teacher a question, before I quickly grabbed my backpack, and ran out the door.

"No running, Miguel!" I heard Abuelo yell faintly as I headed to school. I chuckled slightly, slowing my pace to a walk so I could take in my surroundings.

It was a nice day out, and there was no sign of the dark gray clouds from yesterday. I was careful to avoid the puddles left from last night as I began my walk to school, which would take at least twenty minutes.

I kicked at a pebble, thinking over the past 24 hours. 'Gosh, I acted like such a baby last night, running to my parents,' I kicked the rock farther away, into the street. 'Why can't I just be like normal kids, and have nightmares about, I don't know, snakes and heights or whatever.' I thought glumly.

'I wish I could tell my family what happened,' I sighed dismally as I spotted the school, lifting the hood on my jacket. 'They'd just think I'm loco though, and put me in an asylum.' I shuddered, imagining myself being forced into a straight jacket as my parents told me it was for my own good.

In my peripheral vision, I could see two large boys coming towards me, twin sneers on their faces. My eyes widened as I recognized them, and I attempted to make a break for it into the school,

knowing that they couldn't hurt me in front of a teacher. I made it a few feet before I was pushed forcefully from behind, falling hard to the ground.

Pain shot through my palms as my hands broke my fall on the concrete, but I knew I couldn't stay there. I tried to stand back up quickly, knowing I needed to get away, but it was useless. I coughed as I was grabbed roughly from behind by my jacket, lifted up into the air to face my third assailant.

"Well hello there, Enano," the big teenager grinned predatorily. "Pleasure seeing you at this fine establishment," he crooned, his voice oozing sarcasm.

His two lackeys walked up to join him, laughing obnoxiously loud at my predicament.

"Nice catch, Jake!" The large kid with bright, carrot-colored hair cackled.

"Let me go!" I shouted, swinging my arms at him wildly.

"I agree, Juan. A very nice catch indeed." Jake smirked, watching me struggle futilely.

"What are we gonna do to him?" Asked the last teenager. His acne-covered face made him look boyish, but he was taller than the other two by half a foot at least.

"We, Tomás, are going to enjoy our catch the best way he can." Jake set me down. "By pummeling him, till he's blue all over!" Jake finished with a vicious sneer, punching me in the gut.

The air was stolen from my lungs as I bent over, clutching my stomach. I desperately tried to catch my breath, but it seemed the harder I tried, the less air I got. I felt a kick to the back of my knees that left me sprawled on the ground. I took a few more shaky breaths, and finally got my breathing under control, right before I felt myself being lifted into the air again. I lost count of how many times they punched me, their fists coming down all over my body. It felt like ages before I heard the warning bell ring, and I was

dropped to the cement like a sack of potatoes.

"See you around, Enano." Jake laughed, kicking me in the head. My vision went dark momentarily, and by the time I was able to see again, he and his sidekicks were gone.

I sat up cautiously, trying to figure out what all was hurt. Nothing seemed too bad besides a couple of bleeding scratches, so I carefully stood, wincing as the fog in my head cleared some, making the pain more noticeable. I checked my teeth, making sure I hadn't lost any, before spitting out blood.

'Well, that can't be good. Probably just a split lip though,' I hoped, pulling up my hood. I took a step forward, trying to maintain my balance as the world spun around me.

It took a few minutes, but once I finally felt like I could walk without passing out, I looked around for my backpack. It took a moment or two, but I spotted it eventually a few meters away. 'Oh right,' I recalled. 'I dropped it when I tried to make a break for it. Like that ever works.' I scoffed to myself, shaking my head slightly, before wincing. 'Man, my head kills.'

I reached under my hoodie and touched the right side of my head, where it hurt the most. I hissed as I pulled back my hand quickly. I gulped silently when I noticed my fingers were drenched in blood, as if it were finger paint. 'But at least my hair pretty much covers up all of it.' I thought hysterically, wishing I didn't have to consider things like that

'And on the bright side, my family will probably be too busy to notice that anything's wrong!' I comforted myself darkly, limping to the school doors. I picked up my pace to a slight jog as I realized that I was going to be late if I didn't hurry. Ignoring the pain that seemed to envelope my body, I rushed into the classroom, fighting against the black dots spotting my vision. Finally reaching my desk, I groaned quietly as I sat down, seconds before the tardy bell rang.

The teacher performed roll call as I lowered my head into my arms, the lights turning the roaring in my head to an unbearable level. Soon, the teacher began talking about fractions, and their

importance in everyday life. I tried to pay attention as best I could, but found myself zoning out for larger and larger periods of time. Before I knew it, we were lining up to wait for the next teacher, and it was time for Biology.

I grimaced at the realization I'd have to go through hours more of school until I could go home. By the time my last class came around, I was struggling to keep my eyes open. My head was killing me, and all I wanted to do was go home and sleep forever.

'It doesn't help,' I grimaced, looking at my scratched palms. 'That I've been taking notes all day with these stupid cuts on my hands. It burns!' I fought down a hiss at the pain for what felt like the hundredth time today. I was tempted to go to the nurse's office, but I didn't want to seem like a wimp who couldn't handle a little pain, so I ended up just trying to write as best as I could with them.

After what felt like literal days, the last bell rang, and I rushed out the door before I could get caught in the mob of students. I ran as fast as I could, hoping to outrun Jake and his friends.

I cheered inwardly when I reached my house without seeing hide nor hair of them, sneaking up the stairs to my room before I could get roped into doing any chores for Abuelita.

Closing my bedroom door behind me, I quickly took off my uniform and inspected the damage. My eyes widened as I took in the vivid blue and black bruise that spread across my stomach and chest. I touched it tentatively, wincing when I put the smallest amount of pressure on it. I quickly checked the rest of my body, and noted a few bruises on my back, along with a couple on my arms and legs, though none of them looked as bad as my chest.

I put on a faded black shirt, hissing quietly when the movement hurt my chest, before putting on a pair of loose jeans. I opened my door slightly to see if anyone was there, before rushing into the bathroom and locking the door. I grabbed a wad of toilet paper, and wet it with water from the sink, carefully dabbing the damp sheets at the side of my head. I clenched my teeth tightly, trying to ignore the pain and not make a single sound. I pulled the makeshift washcloth away, frowning slightly at the amount of blood on it.

After cleaning the cut as well as I could, I covered it with my hair, before throwing away the toilet paper and heading downstairs for lunch.

"And then he dumped me for some girl with frizzy hair and braces!" I heard Rosa complain as I neared the kitchen. I tuned out the rest of her conversation with Tía Carmen, taking my spot at the table. I noticed the two chairs that were usually occupied by my parents were empty. Instead of commenting, I swallowed down a few bites of the tacos Abuelita had made, before retreating back to my room.

'No one even said hi to me,' I sighed, flopping onto my bed. I had planned on doing homework once I'd finished lunch, but my eyelids felt so heavy, and I still had plenty of time until dinner. I wriggled under the covers, quickly deciding to take a short nap before starting on my homework.

I closed my eyes, turning my head into the cool pillow. I tried to relax, and before I knew it, I was drifting off to sleep.

~•~

I woke up slowly, my senses gradually awakening as I took a deep breath. I kept my eyes closed, but was able to note that the light that filtered through my eyelids was considerably dimmer.

'I must have slept for a couple hours at least.' I took in the noises coming in through the window, the street dogs barking, children playing, and vendors selling. I could smell dinner being made down below; if I had to guess, it was probably chicken quesadillas.

I opened my eyes, rubbing away the sleep goo from them. Sitting up, I checked my clock, smiling when I realized it was 6:45, and I'd managed to sleep for around three hours. Sliding off my bed, I grabbed my backpack from beside my desk, before sitting down and starting on my homework.

I struggled through the worksheets that contained numbers and words I didn't remember, and rubbed my head, trying somehow to soothe the pain within my skull from the outside. It took me around an hour to finish everything, much longer than it usually took me,

and by then, I was exhausted, and everything was slightly blurry.

I considered just going back to sleep. My bed looked so warm, and cozy, and my eyelids were so heavy, and—

"Miguel! Time for dinner!" I heard my Tío Berto yell faintly from downstairs.

I sighed, sending one last longing glance at my bed before dragging my body up from the desk, and heading downstairs.

I got a glass of water before sitting in my chair and taking a small quesadilla. I tried to block out the noise my family was making, all of the racket caused by the forks on plates, their loud chewing, and the deafening chatter. I ate around half of my quesadilla, before cutting up the rest and subtly hiding it with a napkin. I looked around for mis padres, but I didn't see them.

"Where are—" I started, until Abel interrupted with an annoyed groan, his face scrunched up in a sneer.

"Miguel! Your parents are looking after Coco!" He said, enunciating each word slowly, as if I was an idiot.

"How did you—" I began, confused, before Rosa, too, interrupted me.

"It's all you ever talk about anymore! You're always asking about them like a clingy little baby! Just grow up! They have Coco to care for now, and don't need you begging for them constantly." She scowled, her voice like ice.

"You—you don't mean that!" I spluttered, tears rising to my eyes.

By this time the entire family had stopped talking and eating, and were watching the conversation with wide eyes. Abuelita looked like she was about to say something, but before she could, Rosa continued.

"All you are is a burden and an annoyance, one they don't need anymore!" She crossed her arms with a huff.

"Rosa! That wasn't nice. Apologize, right now!" Tío Berto scolded, leading her to offer up a mumbled 'sorry'.

But I couldn't help but notice that he hadn't told her that she was wrong—just that what she said wasn't nice. I looked around at my family, waiting for someone to say she was wrong, to tell me that my parents still cared for me, to say something!

A few moments passed before I turned to Abuelita, hoping she of all my family would tell me it wasn't true.

Abuelita sighed as she looked me in my eyes. "I'm...I'm not a nuisance...am I?" I asked weakly, trying to keep tears from falling down my face.

"You're not a nuisance..." Abuelita glared at Rosa, who simply shrugged indifferently back. "However...you need to understand that your parents don't have time for all of your antics right now. They have baby Coco to care for." She said, her words leaving me breathless in a way even worse than Jake's punches had.

I felt something break inside of me as I looked at my family, and saw on their faces that they agreed with her. I couldn't believe it! 'No, no, no, this is all just a bad dream, this, this can't really be happening!'

'You saw the signs,' said the voice deep within me, and this time...I couldn't deny it. After all, it was right. My family didn't care about me.

I forced myself to focus on my abuela in front of me, and on coming up with some sort of reply. I didn't want them to see me cry, to prove them right, so instead, I focused on the other emotion I was feeling right now—*betrayal*. 'If they don't want me, fine. I don't need them. I...I don't need their love.' I hardened my resolve.

"May I be excused?" I asked, my voice quiet as I glared down at my plate.

"But, you, you've hardly eaten! Have some more quesadillas!" Abuela insisted hesitantly, clearly startled by my sudden change of

emotion.

"I'm not hungry," I muttered, not looking up from my plate.

"I asked if you wanted more quesadillas." Abuela said, using a tone of voice that made everyone wish to obey her out of fear of angering or upsetting the old woman.

My family went back to eating, probably assuming I was fine, that I'd eat some more quesadillas before going up to bed like the rest of the family. After all, no one in our family dared to go against Abuela when she used that voice. Normally, I'd cower at it as well, and accept more food with a hesitant smile.

Not today though. For the first time ever, in my twelve years of existence, I wouldn't let myself be pushed into making myself sick all night with a too full stomach. 'I'm tired of this. Tired of being treated like a pet, something they can just push to the side when they get a newer, better one.'

"No." I whispered, my voice cold as I glared down at my hands clenched tightly in my lap.

There was a sudden hush, the lack of sound making it easy to hear as a fork fell to the ground.

"What did you say?" Abuela hissed, and I could see her grabbing her chancla from the corner of my eyes.

"I said no." I looked up at her, channeling all the hatred, anger, and hurt I had felt for so long into glare. She stumbled back slightly at my fierce expression, before regaining her balance.

"I will hit you with my chancla!" She yelled, shaking it in the air, as if I was somehow stupid enough not to have known why she was holding it.

"I don't care, hit me if you like." I practically hissed, unfazed. My tone was firm, and I could see it unnerved her. I was usually a very peaceful kid, and hardly ever argued, except for where music was involved. My whole family was staring at me now in shock, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Finally, my Abuela regained her composure. "Against the wall, then. For disobeying me, ten hits." I knew she was going light on me, as it was the first time she'd ever used her chancla on me. Compared to the other children, I was basically an angel. However, I'd seen my cousins get the chancla before, and by the end of it, they were always crying.

'I won't cry!' I got up from my chair, walking to the wall. I put my hands on the wood, and braced myself for the pain to come. 'They do not get to make me cry.'

The first hit was brought down and it stung my bottom; however, I realized it wasn't nearly as bad as my cousins made it out to be. The next swats hurt a bit more as she built up momentum, but it didn't hurt nearly as much as Jake's kick to the head today did.

By the time my Abuela hit me for the last time, my behind burned slightly, but it was still way better than the beating I'd gotten earlier at school. I turned around as she put her slipper back on, and I watched as my family's expressions morphed from understanding winces to shocked gaping.

'I guess they really thought I was a baby, huh.' I glanced at my Abuela, raising one of my eyebrows.

"May I be excused?" I asked, only somewhat attempting to make the question not sound sarcastic.

"Y-yes, I suppose so." My abuela stuttered out, shocked to see I didn't look any worse for wear.

I quickly grabbed my plate and cup, putting them in the sink. I exited the room in a relaxed gait, taking in the hushed voices of my family as I did so. Scurrying up the stairs to my room, I closed the door behind me with a sigh, leaning against the old wood for a moment.

Walking over to my bed, I practically fell onto it, trying to process what had just happened. Tears streamed down my face as I finally let myself fully realize what my family had said. I cried quietly for what must have been hours, the noise from downstairs slowly

ceasing as one by one everyone went to bed. When my tears finally slowed, I rubbed my eyes, suddenly feeling very exhausted from the events of the day.

I looked at my alarm clock, realizing it was eleven, and my parents had forgotten to say goodnight to me again. 'Face it Miguel,' I bit my lip, sighing deeply as tears came to my eyes again. 'They're not forgetting you. That would imply that they were going to say goodnight to you and then forgot; they were never going to say goodnight to you in the first place. After all, why would they even talk to a kid they no longer love?'

I turned into my pillow and started sobbing again. I knew I was being a baby, but I didn't care anymore. It was all just too much for me to handle.

However, I froze at the feeling of a cool breeze against my wet cheek. Opening my eyes, I was shocked when I noticed a swirling, golden light getting brighter and brighter, right in the middle of my room.

I shielded my eyes with my hand as the glow became too bright for me, and the wind blew back my hair. Yet, as quickly as it started, the light began to dim. After a few more minutes, it vanished completely, along with the strange wind. I rubbed my eyes, trying to get them to adjust to the darkness of my room once more, and when I was finally able to see again, it took me several seconds to fully comprehend what was in my room.

Or rather, *who*.

My eyes widened in shock at what the golden light had left behind.

"¿Papá Héctor?"

¿Papá Héctor?

I know most people don't read this, and it sometimes annoys me when half the chapter is this huge long author's note, so I'll keep it short. If you like it, please comment or vote:)

Miguel's POV

"¿Papá Héctor?" I stared at the human figure sitting on the floor in front of me. Rubbing my eyes, I wondered if this was another twisted dream, or if my brain was more damaged by Jake than I thought.

"Miguel?" Papá Héctor stood up shakily as he inspected his skin-covered hands in awe, before looking back at me with a smile on his face.

I grinned at him, a slightly hysterical laugh coming out of my mouth against my will. 'He...he's really here. He's here!' I shot off my bed, jumping into his arms. He caught me and twirled me around as we both cheered joyously, glad to see each other again.

He set me down, but I clung to him tightly, refusing to let him go again. He must have felt similarly, because he gripped me firmly in his own arms, which I could not help but notice were much warmer than they were a week or so ago. Our hug lasted for what must have been minutes, but felt like seconds, before I pulled away to get a better look at him.

I inspected the face I'd only seen in photos, the one with a large nose, bushy eyebrows, and ears that could rival an elephants. As I looked him over, I realized he was wearing different clothing from when I'd last seen him. He had on a red long-sleeved shirt with neater-looking brown pants, though they were small on him, as they didn't quite reach his feet.

"How...how is this possible? How are you here?" I couldn't stop staring at him, trying to process the fact that somehow my century

dead tatarabuelo was somehow in my room and looked to be alive again.

'And only a few years older than Abel, too.' I mentally noted, taking in his lack of gray hairs and wrinkles. 'He could pass as my cousin, maybe even my brother!'

"I...I don't know. One minute I was laying down in bed and Imelda and I were talking...well, more so her telling me what had happened after we sent you home, and I passed out. Actually, I just woke up for the first time today. What a surprise it was to wake up to Pepita's big face right above me!" Papá Héctor shook his head, shuddering at the memory, and I laughed as I imagined how he must have reacted.

"So anyways, I was in bed one moment with Imelda mentioning how I needed new shoes, and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground in front of your bed!" Papá Héctor motioned to the wood boards underneath us, scratching his shaggy mane of hair in bewilderment.

I sniffled slightly, and Papá Héctor's head whipped back around to focus on me. "Are you sick, Chamaco?" He kneeled on the ground to get a better look at me in the dark, feeling my forehead with the back of his hand.

I saw his eyes widen as he took in what I looked like, after what had been a spectacularly awful day. I pursed my lips, knowing that I probably looked more dead than he did based on what I had seen in the school's bathroom mirrors earlier.

"Were...were you crying, Miguelito?" His voice was gentle and laced with concern. I found my eyes becoming wet again again as I realized I'd missed this. I'd missed having someone there for me, that I could talk to if I had a problem, or if I just wanted a hug. Someone to tell me that it'd be alright, and that they loved me. I knew those were stupid and childish desires, but I couldn't help myself from wanting them as I practically threw myself at the man I'd only known for a night. Tears poured down my cheeks as I clutched the back of his shirt, desperately hoping he wouldn't shove me away.

He hugged me for a few minutes, before picking me up, holding me gently in his arms as I brought my hands in front of me once more, fisting them into the material of his shirt. I lay my head against his chest, breathing in the comforting scent of old wood and leather that clung to the fabric. I closed my eyes, trying to slow down my erratic breathing.

I felt Papá Héctor move to the bed, sitting down on the old, creaky mattress slowly. He set me down in his lap and I sensed him moving his legs onto the mattress. After a moment, I opened my eyelids, dimly surprised at how much effort such a simple action took.

"It's alright, Mijo. Rest." His tone was commanding, but soft. He started to sing quietly, rocking me back and forth in a manner quite soothing. Part of me was indignant, wondering if this was what my parents had done with baby Coco only a few hours ago. But the other part of me...thought it was nice. As a once in a while sort of thing.

I felt my eyes closing involuntarily, and couldn't muster up the mental or physical strength to fight the wave of exhaustion that washed over me. I let myself relax, and fall asleep to the soothing sound of my Papá singing *Remember Me*.

Héctor's POV

I sang quietly until I saw Miguel's breaths deepen. I sighed as I held him tight to me, wanting to never let go. It seemed like he'd had a hard couple of weeks since our adventure together, and I could not help but wonder what had occurred while I was busy recuperating en la Tierra de los Muertos. Inspecting Miguel closer with the help of the moonlight trickling in through the window, I noticed he had bags under his eyes, and that his hands had scratches on them that looked new.

'He hasn't had it easy,' I looked around at his room, my frown deepening as I noticed the lack of any personal touches, except for a few toys, and a familiar white guitar propped against the bed. I wondered momentarily how he'd gotten it, before deciding I probably didn't want to know.

'His toys explain partially why he was so interested in music, though.' I glanced again at the used objects that were all damaged in some way, and had clearly seen better days.

'What kid wouldn't, if this is all he had to entertain himself. Heck, I had more toys as a kid, and I had five siblings!' I mentally exclaimed. Even now, I held tightly to the many memories of playing with my little sisters and brothers I had. Although I was the oldest, I never really minded babysitting when it meant spending time with them, even though I complained as a kid.

I grimaced as my thoughts drifted to a far less pleasant memory. I was coming home one day after getting groceries at the market, and was excited to show them the guitar I'd gotten. It'd taken all of the money I'd made at side jobs over the last six months, but I thought it was worth it. I was shocked to find that our house was on fire, with a large crowd around it, trying to put it out. My childhood home and my entire family was gone, in less than a day. I was only 17 at the time, and I ended up living on the streets after that.

'If only I'd known about the rules. If only I'd shared stories of my family.' I thought forlornly, as I recalled looking for my family in la Tierra de los Muertos, only to find out that they had all suffered the Final Death together, the moment I died. I shook my head, trying to force myself to focus on the present.

Pushing the memories to the back of my mind, I noticed that my cheeks felt wet. 'Am I crying?' I carefully detangled one of my arms from under Miguel, trying not to shift him too much. 'I am! For the first time in a century, I'm crying!' I laughed at how ridiculous it was to be overjoyed to have the ability to express sorrow.

Miguel shifted at the noise, and I quickly put my arm under him again to better support him, letting out a soft sigh as he became still once more. 'How is this possible? The dead can't cry!'

I looked down at my skin covered hand, as it held Miguel to my chest. 'I'm really alive...aren't I?' I let that thought sink in as I stared at my body, from my dirty fingernails, to my hairy calves.

'How did this happen?' I wondered with a yawn. My eyes were sore

from the tears, so I closed them, letting my head fall back against the headboard.

~•~

I awoke quickly, my eyes darting rapidly around the room.

'I could have sworn I heard something...'

I glanced at the clock next to Miguel's bed, wondering if it had gone off, and that was what had woken me up. However, after realizing it was only 2:30 in the morning, I decided to try to get a few more hours of sleep.

'It's weird.' I laid my head down again. 'I'm usually a very deep sleeper.'

I was about to fall asleep, when I heard a scream. Jolting, my eyes shot to the child in my arms as I realized what had woken me up.

"No! Don't hurt him! Get away **Ernesto!** Papá Héctor, you can't die! Please!" Miguel shouted, thrashing around in my arms. There was sweat shining on his face in the dim moonlight, and goosebumps along his arms.

I stared at his pinched expression, taking in the tears streaming down his cheeks, and jumped into action. I quickly started trying to shake him awake, finding it unbearable to watch him in pain, and attempted to tell him that I was alright, hoping that somehow he could hear me. I winced as Miguel shrieked in terror, before I continued my efforts with renewed vigor, being gentle but firm as I shook his chest.

"Come on, kid! Wake up!"

Abruptly, Miguel's eyes shot open, pushing me away as his motions to escape increased in vigor. I held my hands up placatingly, trying to soothe him with my words, only for him to face me with fear written all over his face.

I was hurt momentarily, until I realized that Miguel wasn't looking at me, so much as *through* me. 'He's not here...he's having a panic

attack!' I realized, dumbfounded as I watched him trying desperately to crawl away from me, before falling off the bed.

"Miguel!" I shouted, leaning forward to catch him. Unfortunately, I was too slow, and he landed on the ground in a heap of windmilling limbs.

I got off the bed as Miguel scuttered back on his hands and heels to the corner of the room. He kept looking all around him, as if he saw something in the shadows that would come out and eat him if he let down his guard. Seemingly not calmed by the lack of visible danger, Miguel brought his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms tightly around them, shaking back and forth slightly. My heart broke as he whimpered quietly, tears still streaming down his face.

I slowly walked towards him, keeping my hands up and open, trying to show him I meant no harm. "It's okay, Miguel; it's alright. It's just me, Papá Héctor. I'm not gonna hurt you," I whispered soothingly.

I waited a few seconds, yet he didn't react at all to my words. 'I don't know what to do! What can I do to get him to recognize me, to pull him from his mind, to remember—that's it!' I scolded myself mentally for not thinking of this sooner, as I took a deep breath, and began to sing.

I watched Miguel closely, smiling slightly when he started to blink in confusion. I continued to sing softly, and he eventually stopped rocking and whimpering. Finally, after I'd sung through *Remember Me* five times, Miguel sniffled, his gaze finally focusing on me.

"Papá Héctor?" He asked weakly, rubbing his red, swollen eyes.

"Sí, Mijo," I replied, gathering him up into my arms. I did my best to ignore how he flinched slightly before throwing his arms around my neck, and wrapping his legs around my stomach. I pulled his head to my shoulder with my right hand, putting my left appendage under him to support some of his weight.

I continued to hold him tight to me, inwardly rejoicing when I heard small sniffles transition slowly into deep breaths. I hummed

softly while swaying around the room, trying to help him relax so he would fall back to sleep. After around fifteen minutes, I felt Miguel's hold on me loosen, and I knew he was no longer awake. By that point, I, too, was exhausted, and I was sorely tempted to join him in the land of dreams.

Yet, I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes, and wake up to Miguel's screams of terror again. Sighing, I walked over to the bed, shifting Miguel so I was once more holding him bridal style. Sitting on the bed, I resigned myself to a silent vigil for the rest of the night.

Miguel's POV
The first thing I realized upon waking up was my slight headache, along with the itchiness that came from dried tear tracks. However, the second thing I noticed was that I felt more well-rested than I had in weeks, if not months. I shifted slightly, about to check what time it was on my clock, when I abruptly realized that I wasn't in my bed. I frowned slightly as I noticed my pillow was warmer than usual, and...moving?

"Good morning, Chamaco," said a quiet voice above me. My eyes shot open, and I abruptly noticed that someone was holding me. 'Was I kidnapped?!' I thought frantically, trying to escape, struggling against the arms that tightened around me.

"Miguel! Miguel, relax! It's just me, Papá Héctor!" The voice said soothingly.

I instantly stopped struggling and looked up at who was holding me. My eyes widened as I suddenly remembered what happened last night.

"I-I'm sorry Papá Héctor, I for-forgot, I thought you were—" I stuttered, shuddering at the thought of **him**, before Papá Héctor shushed me gently.

"It's alright, Mijo, you didn't know. Just relax," his voice was soothing, and I took a deep breath, before laying my head down against his chest. I felt Papá Héctor drag his hand through my messy hair, and I smiled slightly at what felt like the first loving

physical touch I'd had in ages.

He continued to rake his hands through my hair, not pausing as he asked, "Miguel, why were you crying last night?"

I was tempted to try to change the subject, but I knew I'd have to tell him eventually. I sighed, and kept my head on his chest, knowing I couldn't bear to tell him if I was facing him. "Just wait till the end to say anything, okay?" I asked pleadingly.

"Okay, Miguelito," Papá Héctor whispered, kissing the top of my head.

I decided to start with how I tried to ask where my parents were at dinner. He didn't need to know that I was bullied at school for being such a wimp. I explained how Rosa and Abel scolded me, and how Abuela said that I needed to stop acting up, that my parents didn't need me making trouble for them.

I forced back tears at that point, and took a deep breath, before explaining how I asked to be excused, but she wouldn't let me leave. When I got to the point where I said I didn't care if I got hit with the chancla, Papá Héctor stopped moving his fingers through my hair for a moment.

I paused, wondering why he had stopped. Before I could question him on it, though, he resumed the action with a muttered apology. Figuring it couldn't be anything too concerning, I grinned as I told mi papá how I didn't cry at all, and just walked calmly up to my room after the punishment was over.

"I...I cried for a couple hours, before looking at the clock, and realizing...they weren't coming. My parents had forgotten me again. Or...or just weren't going to bother to say goodnight to me in the first place." I muttered, a couple tears falling down my cheeks before I brushed them away angrily. 'I'm so weak. I started crying just thinking of them. No wonder they think I'm a nuisance, I'm such a baby!' I scolded myself mentally.

"Miguel, look at me." Papá Héctor's hand stilled, turning into a comforting weight on the top of my head.

I didn't want to do that though. I couldn't bring myself to look up, and see the disappointment in his eyes. While I knew that he would be nicer about it than the rest of my family had been, it would still sting to see him discard me as well.

"Miguel, please," he insisted. His voice was like honey, and I felt his other hand on my chin, gently tilting my head upwards. I braced myself to see anger, and maybe even annoyance on his face, and was shocked when I saw neither. He just looked kind of...sad?

"Mijo, I'm not upset with you. You're just a boy, and whether you realize it or not, you need your parents. If you didn't, they wouldn't make you stay with them until you're 18, right?" He explained calmly, with his eyebrows slightly raised.

'That...kind of makes sense. I guess I never thought of it like that.' I nodded slowly, and he continued.

"Your family is busy with baby Coco."

I looked down at my lap with tears in my eyes, as I realized he was going to say the same thing everyone else did last night. "I...I know it's selfish..." I whispered, interrupting him. "But for once, why can't someone realize that I need someone there for me too.

"Not all the time!" I hurried to add, hoping he wouldn't get the wrong idea. "Just once in a while! A—a hug good night maybe or, or just someone asking me how my day was..." I explained, barely noticing how wet my cheeks were becoming.

I sniffled, rubbing my eyes. I expected to be pushed away, maybe ridiculed for having such a childish fantasy. But instead of doing that, Papá's arms tightened around me, pulling me closer to him.

After a few moments, I pushed away, and he rubbed the tears from my cheeks. I could feel my cheeks getting hotter at being treated like a little kid, but I liked it enough to not complain about it and risk having him actually stop.

"What I was going to say was that even though your parents are busy with Coco, they should still make time for you." Papá Héctor

explained, giving me a gentle smile.

I examined his face, trying to see if he was lying to me, but he looked like he was telling the truth. His eyebrows were all scrunched up, and his small smile seemed more sad than anything else.

I tore my eyes from his face, picking at some of the dried blood underneath my fingernails. 'Why is he being so nice? I'm already 12, shouldn't I be starting to act more independent? Why isn't he scolding me like everyone else?'

"You mean...it's not something I did? I didn't mess up?" My voice was hesitant as I tried to damper the hope rising up inside of me.

"Of course not, Mijo. If anything, they're in the wrong for ignoring you like this, and not realizing you felt this way. Have they talked to you at all these past few days?" While I wasn't looking at him, his voice made it sound as though he was irritated.

"Well...not really. A couple days ago I had a nightmare, and I tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't stop seeing...**him**, in the shadows. So I tried to crawl into their bed for the rest of the night. The mattress creaked though, and they caught me and told me that since I'm a big boy and they have Coco now, I can't do that anymore..." I trailed off, glancing at Papá. He looked angry, and for a moment, I was worried I'd done something wrong, before I realized the anger wasn't directed at me.

"They just told you off?! Por Dios, you're just a child! Any good parent would realize when their kid is scared, let alone terrified!" Papá Héctor muttered a few words that I didn't know, but they didn't sound very flattering.

"You probably had a panic attack then, too!" He frowned, glancing at the corner of my room.

"Panic attack? What's that?"

'I'd been attacked? Was he talking about Jake and his lackeys? How could he have known?' I bit my lip, hoping I was wrong. I didn't like

getting beat up, but even though mi familia seemed to think I was a baby, I was smart enough to know that getting adults involved would only make it worse.

Papá Héctor sighed deeply, dragging me back into his lap. "A panic attack, to put it simply, is a moment when one becomes terrified for no physical reason. They're not very fun, and I only know about them because one of my tíos back in Shantytown got them occasionally."

I thought back to last night, and could faintly remember waking up from another nightmare, and being scared senseless again that **he** was in the room, and **he** was trying to kill me. I had crawled into the corner of the room, like I usually did, to wait for a while until I stopped seeing **him** in every shadow and crevice. Thinking back though, this time I'd heard a familiar voice, one that made me think of love and peace. If I was remembering correctly, the voice had even sung a soothing lullaby.

"That...that's what they are? Panic attacks?" At least now I knew their names, which was way better than calling them 'episodes where I briefly go insane' in my head.

"I...I think yours may be caused by ASD," Héctor's arms squeezed tightly for a moment, before loosening again. He leaned back against the headboard, his expression a lot more grimm than it was earlier.

Before I could ask what that ASD was, he continued. "ASD stands for acute stress disorder, which is something you get when you go through something terrifying or painful."

I must have looked confused at his strange knowledge of psychology, because he gave me a wry grin. "You learn a lot in Shantytown, kid. Not all of it is about, uh, adult stuff." He finished, turning away as his smile faded.

My eyes widened as I realized what he was saying. 'My nightmares are all because of Día de los Muertos, and my nightmares are causing my panic attacks...which means all of this is happening because of what happened on Día de los Muertos, and he—'

I sat up straight, grabbing onto Papá Hector's upper arms. "I don't blame you for what happened on Día de los Muertos. I never have, and I never will. That was not your fault."

Papá Héctor looked at me, and I could see his eyebrows all scrunched up. "If I'd have just gotten you home sooner, or taken you to Imelda—"

I shook my head, not letting him continue. "First of all, I lied to you, and said that I had no other family, so you had no idea I had various other dead family members—and that's not even mentioning the fact that Mamá Imelda and you were two of them. And second, you tried to make me go home as soon as you realized I had more family members. *I* was the stubborn one who wouldn't listen to *you*!" I spoke loudly, making sure not to hesitate or stumble —I needed him to believe me.

'In no way, at all, was my AS whatever and nightmares his fault.'

"But I—" he began, before I covered his mouth with my hand.

"If you're blaming yourself for me getting myself cursed, then am I to blame for my parents ignoring me?"

I had to make him see reason. I could see the struggle going on in his head, as he tried to find a fault in my logic, before sighing. Seeing the acceptance on his face, I pulled my hand away.

"No, you're not." He admitted. "I just wish it could be different. You're having all these troubles because of that wretched curse. You're only twelve! You don't deserve to have ASD, or nightmares, or panic attacks..." he shook his head, and his shoulders sagged, looking defeated.

"At least you're here." I smiled at him and he gave me a warm smile in return. "My family ignoring me isn't something either of us had any part in, and if you weren't here, I don't know what I'd have done."

I frowned as I recalled how lonely I'd felt recently, ever since Coco was born. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to blame her. She was just a

baby, and I loved her! She made everyone so happy, especially Mamá Coco. It wasn't her fault that she stole all of my parents' attention.

'If anyone is to blame,' I realized suddenly. 'It's my parents. After all, why would you need two people to calm down one baby? They could take turns, spending time with her and me. I don't need two parents with me. I don't even need one with me all the time, either. I just want one, every once in a while...'

I forced those thoughts to the very corner of my head, trying to bring myself back to the present. Papá Héctor seemed to be deep in thought, so I just sat there, taking in the smell of huevos rancheros being cooked downstairs, and the sound of the vendors setting up and—suddenly Papá Héctor grabbed my shoulders, firmly but gently. I turned to look him in the eye, and was surprised to see his grim expression.

"*Miguel.*"

'Did I do something wrong? All I did was sit here...' I thought, almost flinching when he opened his mouth again.

"Did you forget how much your family loves you?"

The Curse

Some of you probably noticed I changed the name of chapter three. I felt that the title from the last chapter made more since for this one. So, yeah...sorry for any confusion. Without further ado, I give you chapter four. Enjoy, and please vote and review, it motivates me:)

Miguel's POV

"Did you forget how much your family loves you?"

At first, I thought that was a rather random question. It took me a few seconds to understand what he was implying, but when my brain finally filled in the missing pieces, my eyes widened.

'Is that why he's here? Because I didn't keep my promise?' I tried to remember what exactly was going through my head before Papá Héctor showed up, yet no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recall exactly what I was thinking. However, I knew that Papá Héctor's theory made sense.

"I think so," I whispered as I crossed my arms over my chest, and looked at the corners of the room in a desperate attempt to avoid facing him.

"Mijo," He placed his hand on my cheek, and I looked up at him. "It's alright. No harm done. I'm just glad I got to see you again." He smiled warmly at me, and I returned the gesture, glad that he wasn't upset.

"If what you're saying is true though...how can you get back to la Tierra de los Muertos?" I asked, concerned that Mamá Imelda would start to panic if he didn't return soon, as he probably just disappeared in a ball of gold—

'This is really bad.' I grabbed my hair, tugging on it anxiously, hoping I was wrong. 'Really, really—'

"Miguel, what is it?" Papá Héctor sounded worried, but I couldn't stop thinking about Mamá Imelda.

"Papá Héctor, when you showed up here, you showed up in a ball of golden light. How do you think Imelda reacted when you disappeared in one?!"

Papá Hector gaped for a moment, before slapping his forehead with a muttered curse. "If only I could see her, tell her that I'm alright!" Papá Héctor groaned, holding his head in his hands.

I thought for a moment, trying to come up with some sort of idea on how to get Papá Héctor home. 'I don't want to say goodbye, but I can't stand the thought of Mamá Imelda thinking he's...gone,' I sighed, wishing there was some way that I could be with Papá Héctor and still have the comfort of knowing Mamá Imelda was alright, and not mourning over someone she just got back.

"Maybe...if I just remember how much my family loves me...you can go back?" I suggested hesitantly. Papá Héctor stared at me at, and I wondered what he was thinking. I tried to hide my sorrow at him leaving so soon, but I knew he saw it when he gave me a sad smile and ruffled my hair.

"Hey!" I complained, batting his hands away. He laughed as I scowled, trying to flatten it as best I could. I groaned a few moments later, realizing my hair would be untamable today. With a sigh, I gave up trying to make it look more presentable, reasoning no one would see me anyways as it was a Saturday.

'That reminds me,' I scrunched up my nose in disgust as I looked at my backpack, thinking of what was inside it. 'Stupid history assignment.' Unfortunately, I hadn't been able to convince my family to get a computer yet, so I was stuck going to the library to read dozens of old books every time I had a report.

'It's so boring there, and the old ladies in charge are so mean!' I winced mentally at the thought of having to go there before next Friday, when the project was due. However, looking back at Papá Héctor, I got an idea.

"Maybe one of the books in the library can help us?" I got up and went into my closet as I got dressed for the day, putting on a pair of jeans and a dark blue T-shirt.

"That's not a bad idea!" Papá Héctor said, grabbing my brush as he, too, tried to make my unruly mane look neater, to no avail.

"Face it, Papá Héctor," I looked up at Papá Héctor with a slight grin. "I inherited your musical talent and horrible hair!"

Papá Héctor gasped dramatically, holding his hand to his chest in mock pain. "You take that back! My hair is glorious!" He put his hand on his hip, running his other hand's fingers through his raven locks.

I gave him a mock doubtful look.

"The ladies loved my hair," Papá Héctor proclaimed loudly with a grin. "Especially Imelda."

I laughed at his antics, and I was about to head to the bathroom, before I realized I couldn't take Papá Héctor with me. Turning to him, I could see the same thought process going through his head as well. 'I don't even want to imagine what would happen if they saw him here.' I shuddered at the image of my Abuela hitting him over the head repeatedly with her chancla.

"Papá Héctor—" I rubbed my arm anxiously. "they don't know about your innocence yet. I've been saving up money, to buy an investigator, and prove that the letters you sent Mamá Coco are real. In those letters, you wrote the lyrics to many songs that...**he** claimed were **his**, but if I can get someone to prove those letters were written when they were, people will know it was you who wrote them, and maybe, learn how you were...murdered..." I trailed off, glancing at the ground as I waited for him to say something.

A few seconds passed, and I began to worry he was angry at me for not telling my family yet. 'I just don't want them to think I'm crazy, it's bad enough—'

My thoughts trailed off as I heard a loud sniffle. Concerned, I

looked up. "Papá Héctor," I started, before he rushed over to me, gathering me up into a bone-crushing hug. "Are...are you okay?" I asked hesitantly, glancing at the tears falling down his cheeks.

He didn't answer. I was about to repeat my question, when he sent me a beam that was brighter than the sun. "Mijo, I am more than okay. I have the best great-great-grandson in the world!" He stated proudly, twirling me around and around. Finally, when I was sure I couldn't endure the spinning anymore without puking, Papá Héctor set me back on my feet, continuing to grin down at me joyously.

I laughed as I smiled shyly back up at him, secretly pleased at the high praise. I'd never gotten a compliment like that before, and coming from him, it mattered even more! "Why don't I go brush my teeth, and after, I can sneak you out so we can go to the library together?" I suggested, hoping that we could at least spend the day with each other.

"Won't your family notice if you go missing?" He asked, clearly anxious that my family would freak out if I just disappeared.

"Nah, they don't really care where I go, as long as I stay out of illegal stuff, do my chores, and am back for dinner." I listed off on my fingers the few rules I had, along with the obvious 'no music' one I didn't obey.

'I could probably be dead for hours and they'd never even notice,' I thought bitterly, before pushing the thought to the back of my head.

"Are you kidding me?! That's completely irresponsible of them! You could be kidnapped or something, and they'd have no clue!" Papá Héctor looked infuriated, his face red, and steam practically coming out of his ears.

"Papá Héctor, you need to calm down, or someone will hear you!" I hissed at him. My eyes widened as I heard someone walking in the hall outside. I grimaced when they stepped on the loose board in front of my door.

Papá Héctor's mouth snapped shut, and he gave me an apologetic

look. His lips pursed when he heard the creak as well, and he looked frantically around the room, as if searching for an invisible hiding space. We waited a few more seconds, to be sure the coast was clear, before I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding.

"That was close," I muttered under my breath, shivering bit at the close call. "I can't believe they haven't heard us at all so far."

I tilted my head. "Then again, my room is pretty far from all the others...besides the bathroom, that is. No one really cares what I do in here, and it's been a couple weeks since anyone's actually checked to see if I'm in here at night." I explained to Papá Héctor.

'Heck,' I glanced at the window, and to my bed sheets, which I could easily imagine as a makeshift rope. 'When I become a teen, that'll be very helpful if I want to go to parties that don't end till one in the morning.'

Turning back to Papá Héctor, I winced at his narrowed eyes as he, too, looked to my window. I watched as the pieces clicked together in his mind, and he whipped his head around, wagging his finger at me. "Your parents may not care where you go at night, but I certainly do! You will not be going who knows where in the middle of the night! Not now, or at any time in the future, until you're at least 18. Understand?" His voice was firm, and I could tell he would not bend on this matter.

"Fine,"I muttered, crossing my arms in front of my chest, and looking at the ground with a pout. 'It's not as if he would be able to stop me once he's back in la Tierra de los Muertos.' I reassured myself, although something about that thought made my chest hurt.

"Why don't you go brush your teeth, and we'll sneak out to the library, hmmm?" Papá Héctor's tone was softer as he laid his hand on my shoulder, clearly trying to change the subject. I decided not to push the matter, mostly because we really did have a bigger problem right now.

Instead, I gave him a small smile, before carefully eased open my bedroom door. I glanced both ways, listening closely for running water or footsteps. After several seconds of silence, I figured the

coast was clear, and rushed out of my room to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth as fast as I could, practically sprinting back to my room just in case someone did decide to talk to me for some reason.

"You ready to go?" I grinned up at him. I couldn't wait to spend the day together!

"Sure, Chamaco," he laughed, tossing me my jacket.

We snuck out of the room, trying to be quiet as we tiptoed down the stairs. Luckily, the kitchen was on the other side of the first floor, which meant that the chances of us being caught were small, given that everyone was still at breakfast. We winced when the door squeaked on its hinges as Papá Héctor opened it. Scurrying outside, we closed the door behind us as silently as possible.

"So, where is the library?" Papá Héctor inquired as he walked down the street, his arms spread out under the sun.

"It's around twenty minutes from here—" I pointed to my left—"that way."

"Well, then why are we going this way?" Papá Héctor asked, pointing forward.

"Because it gets really busy around there in the morning on Saturday, so if we use this route, it won't take much longer and less people will see us." I explained.

At first, Papá Héctor looked like he was offended that I didn't want to be seen with him, until his eyes widened, and he nodded slowly in understanding. "That makes sense. If people saw us together, they'd wonder why we know each other, and who I am."

Papá Héctor let out a nervous chuckle, before smiling down at me. "Smart choice, Chamaco."

I couldn't help straightening slightly at his praise, feeling proud of myself for my quick-thinking. We headed to the library, enjoying the warm weather and each other's presence. It was a rather nice day, and there were even some younger kids playing fútbol in the streets.

We reached the library pretty quickly, and were about to enter, before we heard a man selling food from a vendor. "Warm tacos and tamales!" He called, trying to convince those passing on the street to buy his food.

"We should get something to eat. You haven't eaten since last night," Papá Héctor commented as he started to head over to the vendor, dragging me by the arm with him.

'The smell!' I tried not to gag. 'Why is it making me nauseous?'

"What do you want, Chamaco?" Papá Héctor pulled some coins from the pockets of his pants.

"I'm...I'm not hungry," I tried to make my voice sound relaxed, even though it was getting harder and harder for me not to react to the overwhelming stench.

"Nonsense, Mijo! You should eat something!" He looked from the vendor down to me. I must have looked as sick as I felt, because he hurriedly added, "unless you're not feeling well. It's fine."

I quickly nodded my head, and he bought himself a taco, eating it as we walked away. I could tell Papá Héctor was going to ask what was wrong with me, so before he could, I ran to the entrance of the library.

"Hey, Miguel! Wait up!" He threw away his taco wrapper, jogging to catch up with me. I grinned, dramatically opening the doors to the library.

"Woah," Papá Héctor stared in awe at the tall shelves full of books.

I laughed, realizing that the library we had now in our city was probably a lot different from the one they had when he lived here. "Do they have libraries in la Tierra de los Muertos?" I wondered out loud.

"They do," Papá Héctor seemed pained. "They just...they don't let people...people like me in there, though..." He trailed off, his eyes falling to the ground.

"People like...oh." I went silent as I realized what he meant. The forgotten, or those who were being forgotten, anyway. The people who lived in Shantytown.

Suddenly, I was filled with rage. 'Why are they so mean to those who are being forgotten? They get shoved away to the darkest part of la Tierra de los Muertos, so not only can they be forgotten by the living, but by the other dead as well?! That's so messed up!' ' I realized, grinding my teeth at the unfairness of it all. 'Why, if a group of people were treated like that in the living world, for no reason, it'd be called racism!'

'But...there's nothing I can do about that,' I sighed quietly, realizing I had no control over anyone or anything in la Tierra de los Muertos. I was still alive; I shouldn't even know about that place, technically.

"Hey, cheer up, Chamaco," Papá Héctor smiled down at me, "I can help change that when I get back. In fact, I'm planning on helping the nearly-forgotten a lot when I do return to la Tierra de los Muertos.

"Starting, of course, by bridging the gap between the well-remembered and the nearly-forgotten. I'm going to make sure that the well-remembered acknowledge that the nearly-forgotten are there, and can't just be pushed to the side because it's the easiest thing to do." He declared with a decisive nod.

I stared up at him for a moment, amazed yet again at how Papá Héctor seemed to practically read my mind. "I think that's a great idea." I whispered as a couple of people walked past us, chatting about what books they were going to get.

"Thank you, Mijo." Papá Héctor grabbed my hand, giving it a small squeeze. "Now, let's start looking for books." He said, glancing around at the many shelves

I wasn't a big fan of reading, my hobbies leaning more towards playing music or fútbol. However, I knew that there were librarians that could help us. "Let's go get a librarian's help." I said, dragging Papá Héctor over to a desk with an older woman at it who was

reading.

"Hello, Mrs.—" I glanced at her name tag—"Rodriguez. I was wondering if you could help us find some books about...supernatural stuff."

I smiled nervously at her as she gave us a suspicious look, before standing up, and leading us to an area in the back of the library. I coughed slightly as I breathed in the dust that practically surrounded the corner, barely able to make out the titles in the weak light that filtered through the grimy windows.

"This is it." She gestured to the five shelves of books, and started shuffling back to her desk before I could even thank her. I scrunched up my nose at the shelves, grimacing at the musty smell.

The books looked old, and judging by the fingerprints left behind when I touched one of the spines, not used recently. Despite this, I grabbed one from the end of the top shelf, opening it up reluctantly. I sat on the floor as I began to read, looking for stories that might be able to help.

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"This is hopeless!" I was about to throw the book on the ground, but thought better of it, and just placed it on the 'read' pile with a groan.

"We've been at this for—" I glanced at the clock on the wall—"four hours! And we've found nothing useful!" I stretched my back, wincing when I heard a series of cracks.

I waited for Papá Héctor to say something, but it was as if he hadn't heard anything I said. He was holding a rather large tome, and his eyes were flying back and forth on the page, growing wider the further down he read.

"Miguel, I think I found something!" He exclaimed after a few minutes. Quickly, he began to read out loud."*"In the late 1800's, there was a young man named Diego García. At age 23, he disappeared on Día de los Muertos, after claiming he was going to find and take*

some unheard of hidden treasure that once belonged to Benito Juarez." But it says here that he never did find the treasure, and came back from his hunt with mysterious powers, claiming he had traveled to a place called la Tierra de los Muertos."

I gasped, and was about to start asking questions, before I realized he wasn't done talking yet. "From that day on, whenever handed a picture or painting of a dead person, he could wish that he was with them, and he'd vanish into thin air, in a flash of silver!" Papá Héctor closed the book quickly, letting out a loud grito.

"Shhh!" We heard the librarian scold him from her desk, although we couldn't see her this far back in the building.

"Oops." Papá Héctor winced with a nervous chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.
I laughed as he realized he was still in a library, where it was supposed to be quiet. 'I've done that too,' I thought, remembering the time I shouted for joy as I finally found the answer after searching for it for twenty minutes.

'Maybe that was when the librarians started disliking me...' I pondered to myself, before shaking my head, and focusing on the present.

"Do you know what this means, Miguel?!" Papá Héctor asked. I didn't get a chance to answer, as he continued with a large grin. "This means you can visit us, any time you want!" He picked me up and spun me around as I grinned so hard it hurt.

Finally, he set me down, though we both couldn't wipe our happy expressions off our faces. 'I can't believe it! I can see them all the time!' I hugged Papá Héctor in my excitement, and thought of all the fun we could have together.

We put back the books, and left the library in high spirits. Hurrying back to the house, we snuck in quietly, walking down the hall to my room—

"Miguel! You have to do your chores! Don't you dare forget to sweep the floor in the workshop like last time!" I heard my Tía

Carmen yell from downstairs.

"Okay Tía Carmen, I will," I shouted down to her, hastily entering my room before there were any more interactions with the rest of my family. 'I'm just lucky she's probably too busy to spend time dragging me down there to help.'

I grabbed a picture of Mamá Imelda from my desk, one I'd found in organizing the attic while getting rid of the shrine for...**him**.' I shuddered mentally, disgusted at how much I worshiped that filthy murderer.

The picture was an old, faded one, from the day that Papá Héctor married Mamá Imelda. Mamá Imelda was stunning in her simple white gown, with her small veil pulled back and placed on top of her fancy hairdo. She was looking at the camera, a joyful expression lighting up her face, and seeming more at peace than I had ever seen her. Papá Héctor, though...

He was gazing down at his new wife, awe and love clearly seen in his every feature. It was like to him, nothing else mattered in that moment besides the woman next to him. I would never admit it, but it was really sweet...even if the idea of being that in love with someone seemed crazy to me.

Papá Héctor's fingers trembled as they traced Mamá Imelda. I wondered, as I had when I first found the picture, just why and how it was there. I thought that all of the fotos of him, besides the one stashed by Mamá Coco, were gone. But maybe...maybe Mamá Imelda couldn't bear to get rid of this one, even before she knew what happened to Papá Héctor.

"What if...what if it doesn't work?" I stuttered, forcing back tears as I tried not to grip the old picture too tightly. Papá Héctor placed his hands on my shoulders, and I looked up at him.

"It will, Mijo. I know it will." He assured me with a gentle squeeze.

"But on the chance that it doesn't..." I trailed off as I voiced my worry. 'Will I never see him again, once he goes back, for as long as I live? I....I don't know if I could handle that. Not now that I've had

a chance to experience it.'

"Then we'll find another way. I won't just abandon you, Chamaco," he hugged me tightly.

I melted into the embrace, sighing in contentment. After a couple minutes, I pulled away, grinning up at him. "Here goes nothing," I said, studying the foto one last time. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath.

"I wish to be with Mamá Imelda."

Mamá Imelda

So yeah...another chapter! Yay! This one was harder to write, so it took a bit longer. Please comment and vote!!!;)
Miguel's POV

"I wish to be with Mamá Imelda."

I could imagine how she looked, from her purple dress and black boots, to her intricate facial markings. I even tried to remember what her black, handmade shoes looked like. I inhaled sharply as I felt a powerful tug from inside of me, as if someone was trying to pull out my organs. It hurt, and I felt like I was going to throw up what little I had eaten last night. The pain became worse until, in a blinding light, it disappeared, and I felt myself *falling*.

"Ahhh!" I couldn't help but scream as I landed on a hard surface. Rubbing my eyes, I tried to make them adjust quicker to the sudden loss of light.

"Miguel?!" I heard a familiar voice shout my name.

'Could it be...?' I hoped. My hands fell, and I looked around me.

I grinned happily, noticing that my whole family was here! 'I can't believe it...it actually worked!' I let out a loud grito, unable to contain a slightly hysterical laugh at the impossible situation. I stared at everyone for a few seconds more, surprised that they were all in the same place at one time, and sitting around the table.

'Which, I landed on.'

I grimaced at the thought. Slowly, I slid off the table, rubbing my sore bottom. 'I wish that the weird magic had placed me somewhere with more cushioning. Maybe I should start wearing some pads and a helmet when I—'

"What did you do this time?!" Mamá Imelda's eyes were wider than

I'd ever seen, and I scurried back fearfully.

"I—I didn't do a-anything! I promise!" I stuttered nervously, trying to retreat without looking away from her enraged expression.

Mamá Imelda glared at me for a few more seconds, before she seemed to deflate into herself. "I'm sorry, Mijo," she sighed, staring sadly at the ground. "It's been a rough day. Héctor, he—"

"He's fine!" I interrupted, giving them my best grin. "He's in the living world, actually." I winced when they all gaped at me, even more so than when I had shown up half-dead. 'I really need to get better at my explanations. Maybe I should practice—'

"He's what?!" Mamá Imelda shrieked, her jaw dropping to the floor. She picked it up, putting it back in place quickly, and the look on her face told me I better start talking.

"Well, last night Papá Héctor showed up in a ball of golden light. I was as shocked as you were when he arrived, but was really happy to see him of course, even if it was weird that he had skin and everything." I paused for a second, wondering what it must have been like to suddenly have it back after, like, a century. "He spent the night in my room, because I knew my family wouldn't react very well to him showing up. They'd probably think I'm crazy if I tried to explain how I knew him, and would have dragged us both off to an asylum, so that wasn't happening."

I shuddered a bit at that thought, before continuing with my story. 'No point in dwelling on what-ifs, Miguel—you know that.'

"The next day, we discovered that he was probably there because I didn't obey the condition he put on the petal. It was no longer Diá de los Muertos though, so instead of me returning here, we figured out that the dead relative who initiated the blessing was sent to the living world, to try and make me...obey the rule, I guess..." I trailed off, uncertain if that was actually true.

"We never found out exactly how that worked, otherwise Papá Héctor would be back right now, and obviously he isn't." I explained with a half-shrug. "And we didn't try to send him back immediately,

because we thought I'd never get to see him or you guys again until I died. We wanted to spend a lot of time together, but once we realized that you—" I gestured to Mamá Imelda—"probably believed he was gone forever, we tried to figure out a way that I could still see him and everyone else if I wanted to, once we got him back here.

"So, me and Papá Héctor went to the library to see if they had any books that could help us. It took us *hours* to find anything, but eventually Papá Héctor found this story about a guy who lived over a century ago. Apparently he visited la Tierra de los Muertos regularly after stealing treasure from a dead guy on Día de los Muertos. Because of his theft, he was able to visit people here by holding a picture of them, and saying he wished to be with them. We went back home, tried it out, and here I am!" I spread my arms wide in a ta-da pose, breathing hard; once I'd gotten on a roll, it was hard to remember to stop to take breaths!

My family just blinked at me, their brains probably trying to process the information. It was a lot to hear, and I knew if I didn't live through it, I would be struggling as much as them. So, I decided that that was enough information for now.

Luckily, it only took around thirty seconds for Tío Felipe and Tío Oscar to glance at each other, before beaming down at me.

"All the fun we can have together!" They declared in unison.

"The pranks—" Tío Oscar began.

"—and the parties!" Tío Felipe interrupted.

"We'll have a blast!" They shouted together, cheering loudly.

I laughed, imagining how awesome it would be. 'We could play games all night, and they could tell me all about the tricks they pulled when they were kids!' I thought, my grin growing wider. 'Maybe they'll even help me with Rosa—'

"That's enough you two," Mamá Imelda scolded lightly, though it looked like she was trying to hold back a smile. "So, Miguel." She

turned to me, her expression stern. I fiddled with the bottom of my shirt, pursing my lips.

"If I remember correctly, Héctor only gave you one condition. That condition was to never forget how much your family loves you. So tell me—" her eyes narrowed as she leaned forward—"what exactly happened, that you are not telling us?"

My head dropped even lower as I sighed, knowing it was foolish to think I could avoid telling them anything—they were my family, of course they were as nosy as me. "I..I really don't want to talk about it..." I muttered, figuring it couldn't hurt to try at least once to have them forget about it.

"Miguel," Mamá Imelda kneeled down, putting her hands on my shoulder. I looked up at her through my hair, not sure what to expect. "You may not want to tell us, but you need to so that we can help you fix the problem, and figure out how to send Héctor home."

She spoke with a gentle tone, far kinder than I usually heard these days. And I understood what she was saying. 'Did I wish he could stay with me? Yes. But...' I glanced down at the picture I still held in my hand. 'They deserve to be together again. They've waited long enough, and I...I can't get in the way of that.'

So I nodded, biting my lip as I wondered where to start. "My parents, they've...they've been really busy with my little sister, Socorro. She's just a baby—you guys haven't even met her yet because of the whole disaster this Día de los Muertos. And—" I blinked hard, taking a deep breath. I tried to keep my voice even as I said, "I know they need to spend a lot of time with her, but I never even talk with them anymore, and they haven't been at meals, so I —I asked where they were a couple times too many, and my family...well, Rosa, actually." I clarified, realizing it wasn't fair to lump everyone together. "She said I was a baby, and an annoyance." I choked out, rubbing my eyes angrily, wishing I could force the tears back.

"And Abuela, she...she said I need t-to st-stop my antics." I fumbled over the words, finding it hard to retell the horrible night. "I—I didn't do a-anything though! I—I haven't been starting fights o-or

anything like that!" I stammered, desperately trying to defend myself. I wouldn't be able to stand it if mi familia here also thought the worst of me.

"I...I just wanted to leave. To go to my room, the workshop, anywhere. When I tried to leave though, Abuela said I needed to eat more. And I was exhausted, and angry, and she wouldn't let me go, so I said no. I refused to eat any more of her quesadillas."

I could hear everyone's gasps, but I just wanted to get the story over with. I didn't bother to stop talking, and chose to ignore their whispers. "She warned me what would happen if I didn't eat more, but I didn't care at that point. She hit me with her chancla ten times, and then I was finally allowed to go up to my room. And Papá Héctor showed up later that night—"

"She hit you with her chancla? Are you ok?!" Tía Rosita squeaked, looking worried.

I startled, not expecting the question. "I—yeah, it wasn't even that bad. With the way my primos always cry, I thought it'd be excruciating." I smirked, crossing my arms

"What do you mean 'it wasn't that bad'?! Every other child in this family that's gotten the chancla has started bawling after four or five hits!" Mamá Imelda exclaimed, her eyebrows all scrunched up.

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "They must just be the babies then. I didn't even cry." I stated, secretly proud of what was apparently a great feat. "It was nothing compared to what Jake—" I cut myself off abruptly as every head swiveled to face me, some almost going flying because of the speed at which they'd turned. I gulped nervously, knowing I'd said too much.

"Who is this Jake, and what did he do to you?!" Mamá Imelda questioned, her voice like shards of ice.

I winced slightly at the noise, rubbing the back of my neck anxiously. "He...he's just some bully at school." I said as nonchalantly as possible, wishing I was a better liar.

"What did he do to you?!" Mamá Imelda hissed, looking a lot like her alebrije.

"I-It's just a few sc-scrapes and bruises!" I stuttered.

Grabbing my hand in her own, Mamá Imelda gave my fingers a soft squeeze, avoiding the scrapes on them. "Show me!" She commanded in a firm, gentle voice.

I tried desperately to think of some way to avoid showing them, but as the seconds passed by, and nothing came to mind, I knew it was hopeless. Slowly, I lifted my shirt.

Everyone's eyes grew wide when they saw my chest, and I heard a couple muttered curses. Deciding a few seconds was long enough, I let my shirt drop back into place. My back wasn't that bad anyways, but my head...well. I brushed my hair away from the bloody gash on my head, grimacing when my fingers touched the cut.

"I...I have a few more bruises on my legs, but they're not as bad." I looked at the ground, trying to avoid their pitying expressions. 'I don't want their pity!' I thought angrily. 'And I don't need it! I'm fine! It doesn't even hurt that bad anymore.' I lied to myself. My head felt like it was hit by a rock, and if I didn't move carefully, my stomach would rub against my shirt, making me wince in pain.

I flinched at bony hand reaching under my chin, tilting my head up. I gazed into deep brown eyes, and realized they weren't filled with pity, but...concern.

'They're...concerned. About me!'

I was shocked at the unhidden worry on all of their faces as I looked around the room. Yet, I was even more surprised when I noticed that some of their faces held anger as well. Sure, these people were my family, but most of them had never even met me besides during Día de los Muertos, so why...

'Why do they care so much?'

"Those no good bullies!" Tía Victoria shouted, banging her hand on the table. "Where were the teachers?! Why weren't they stopping

them?! Better yet, why did no one in la familia notice?!"

"Yeah! Your parents may have a baby, but to spend so little time with you that they miss this?! Unacceptable!" Papá Julio scolded, looking like he wished he could give my parents a piece of his mind.

"Come, Mijo! We should bandage that gash on your head." Tía Rosita dragged me away by my arm to the bathroom. She sat me down on the edge of the tub, quickly grabbing a bowl and a washcloth from the cabinet under the sink.

"Wait here." She ordered, before rushing out of the room.

I sat for a couple minutes, wondering why they even had a bathroom, until she returned with a medical kit in her hand. Opening it up, she took out a small roll of gauze, similar to what I'd seen around Papá Héctor's broken bones. She filled the bucket with water, and using the washcloth, gently dabbed away the blood from my wound. I hissed slightly, even the lightest pressure bringing pain.

"I'm sorry, Miguel," she said softly, her expression so sad that I started to feel bad for being hurt.

"It's okay, Tía Rosita," I gave her a small smile, hoping she would smile back.

"You know—" Tía Rosita began bandaging my head—"your parents...they made a mistake. They never should have ignored you like they did."

"Th-They're just busy with Socorro." I rushed to defend them. "I understand. When she's a bit older, they'll start spending more time with me again."

I wasn't sure where the words were coming from, or why I bothered saying them; even to my own ears, it sounded like I was trying to convince myself more than her. And from how her lips twisted into a small frown, they didn't do any good for either of us.

"Miguel," she started hesitantly, before stopping, tying the bandage

in place. She looked at me for a moment, and I knew she was contemplating what to say. She had a gentle expression on her face as she continued to kneel in front of me, her eyes examining her work.

I couldn't remember the last time I had someone take care of my injuries like this. The nurses at school sometimes helped, but they always scolded me for getting hurt because of the excuses I gave them about being clumsy or playing fútbol. Tía Rosita wasn't rushing to get rid of me though, and seemed like she actually liked helping me, which was...weird.

"I remember what it's like to have a little sibling." She finally said, her eyes distant. "Believe it or not, I was extremely unhappy when Julio came along. My parents had to spend time with him, time I was used to having, and I—"

Sighing, she shook her head, grabbing my hands. "I was very jealous, and just wanted him gone." She looked bashful at this, adding, "it was wrong of me to feel that way, of course. But I was only eight at the time, and I had difficulty understanding why my parents couldn't be with me as much anymore."

She squeezed my hands gently between her two skeletal ones, running her thumb over my scrapes with a feather-light touch. "However, when they saw how I was feeling, they explained to me that a baby needs a lot of care, and they tried to spend more time with me."

I frowned when she stopped talking. 'I don't understand what she's trying to say. Is she saying it's alright to want to spend more time with my parents? She was way younger than me though, so she needed her parents. Then is she saying I'm acting younger than I should be? Like Rosa was saying?'

My own thoughts were confusing me, and I was about to ask her to explain what her point was, before she sighed, tilting her head. "Now, I was jealous, and they were still spending every meal with me, and I was almost always with one of them. I was younger than you, yes. Yet, you are still a *child*. Twelve may seem very old to you right now, but to someone like me, who has been around for almost

a century..." She trailed off, and seemed to lose her train of thought for a moment.

Shaking herself, she took a deep breath. "The point I'm trying to make is that even if you don't realize it, you are still so *very young*. You need your parents, whether you realize it or not. They should be paying more attention to you, especially now, so you don't end up having the crazy notion that they love Socorro more than you."

She spoke with so much confidence, and I knew she really believed what she was saying. Still, I wasn't sure. She didn't know my parents, not really. Sure, she might have known mi papá when he was a kid, but...that was years ago.

I must have looked doubtful at her words, because she pointed her finger at me sternly. "Socorro is not any more important than you are, Mijo. If you do think that right now, then it's because your parents have been doing a horrible job of caring for you along with watching over her." Her tone was serious, and even though almost everything my living family members had said went against her words, what she said felt...nice.

'That was the same thing Papá Héctor told me. And maybe it's wrong, and my living family is right, but...' I thought about how my parents still wouldn't stop ignoring me any time soon. I remembered the way it felt, being practically invisible in my own home to the rest of my living family unless I had chores to do.

And glancing at mi tía, I realized something wonderful. 'I don't need them—not really. I have Papá Héctor, Mamá Imelda, Tía Rosita, and all of my other dead relatives. I don't need my living family. I can just be with my skeleton family all the time! They're the only ones who like being with me anyways.' I smiled, content with this plan.

"There's that cute smile!" Tía Rosita squealed, patting my cheek. "Let's go back to the rest of the family," she said, standing up and putting the medical supplies away.

I gladly followed her back into the kitchen, where everyone was sitting down. There were two empty seats, and one with a plate in

front of it stacked high with food. At that moment, my stomach made its hunger known, grumbling loudly. I blushed slightly as my family chuckled, and Tía Rosita guided me to the chair next to the food. My mouth watered as I stared at the chilaquiles, but I noticed that no one else had food in front of them yet, so I forced myself not to grab one.

Mamá Imelda seemed to read my thoughts, though, because she gestured to the plate absentmindedly before I could ask who it was for. "You "dropped in" for a visit at the end of our lunch," she joked wryly. "However, we noticed that you failed to mention eating at all today. So, we thought you might be hungry," she explained, turning from my face to the plate in question.

"It's for me, then?" I asked hesitantly, unused to being the center of attention.

"Of course, Miguel," Tía Victoria said with a small smile, nudging the plate a bit closer.

I took a bite of the food, and groaned at the wonderful taste, shoveling more into my mouth as quickly as possible. It was the best food I'd had in months, though I couldn't figure out why. Surely the food couldn't be that different from what Abuela made!

"Slow down, Chamaco! You're going to choke!" Papá Julio chuckled.

I forced myself to eat a little slower, not all that keen on permanently joining my dead relatives.

"This is really good!" I commented between bites.

"It's Rosita's recipe. She's the best cook in our family. Taught Elena everything she knows." Papá Julio smiled, patting his sister's shoulder.

"She may have taught her, but Abuela's cooking isn't nearly this good!" I stated as I finished the food on the plate with a smile.

"It never was Elena's thing. She always did prefer making shoes." Tía Rosita commented lightly, taking the empty plate to the sink.

"Now, Miguel," I looked over at Mamá Imelda. "Do you have any idea how to get back to the living world?" She asked, her voice hopeful.

I winced. "I was hoping you would." I admitted, watching as her expression dropped. I wished I did have an idea about how to get back for her sake, even if I didn't really want to leave.

'I like her smile much better. Her smile made her even more beautiful on her wedding day.' I put my hand in my pocket, touching the photo, before I brought it out. 'Maybe...maybe if I wish to be with Papá Héctor, I'll go back?' I wondered.

"Maybe I can do the same thing I did to get here." I showed them the picture I'd used to get to la Tierra de los Muertos.

"That just might work," Mamá Imelda grinned at my idea. "Maybe, you can even send Héctor back that way! You can hold his hand as you wish to be with one of us." She suggested, her eyes bright with hope.

"That's a great idea! I'll try it, and if I come back in a few minutes, you'll know it worked." I exclaimed, feeling my own spirits lifting as we came up with a plan, and a good one at that.
I looked at the foto held tightly in my grasp. "I wish to be with Papá Héctor!" I said loudly, imagining how happy Papá Héctor would be to see me again.

I felt the same tugging as before, but this time I expected it, and it wasn't as nauseating. There was a flash of silver, and I was back in my room. I noticed it was considerably darker than before, the sun shining through the windows making long shadows on the walls. My room didn't look a whole lot different, but it felt like it was missing a very important detail.

'Maybe Papá Héctor—' my eyes widened as I realized what was missing—or rather, who. I sprinted out of my room, abruptly noticing the sound of yelling coming from below me. I ran as fast as I could down the stairs, and followed the voices into the kitchen, where I froze in horror at what I saw.

"What are you doing here?! How dare you come to this house? How are you even here?!" Abuela shouted at a cowering Papá Héctor, hitting him repeatedly in the head with her chancla as he kneeled on the ground.

Everyone else was watching the interaction happen, mixed expressions on their faces. While some seemed viciously happy (AKA, Rosa), others seemed more shocked and confused. The sound of another yelp brought me out of my daze though, and raced over to Papá Héctor, shielding him with my body.

"No, Abuela!" I yelled, lifting my hands. Her chancla froze a few inches from me as she gaped, looking between Papá Héctor and I, before glaring.

"You *knew* he was *here*?! Did you bring him to your *room*?! Where were you?!" She shrieked, the questions coming quicker than I could answer them.

"I knew he was here, but he's only here because—"

"I'll deal with you later, Miguel." She hissed. "It doesn't matter why he's here. Out of my way, this músico knew better than to come in here, whether you let him in or not!" She interrupted, trying to force me to the side.

"No!" I yelled, standing firm. "I won't let you hurt him. He doesn't deserve it. If you'd just let me explain—"

"There's nothing to explain! He left Mamá Imelda, plain and simple. This *diablo* chose to chase after fame, and never came back!" Abuela tried to push me away again, and I noticed her shove was more forceful this time.

"Abuela, you're wrong! He didn't—"

My head whipped to the side, and a burning pain burst out across the side of my face. Touching my stinging cheek, I hissed quietly as I felt a sticky sensation on my skin. I blinked at the red on my fingertips, looking up at Abuela.

Her chancla was still in the air, and she looked furious. Her

expression was even worse than it was on Dia de los Muertos, which I didn't think was possible. Slowly, she lowered the tool, her mouth opening and shutting with no words coming out.

'She...she hit me! I was only trying to explain!' I thought miserably, coming to terms with what had just happened. 'She hit me! I was only talking, and she hit me!'

The thought went 'round in my head on a loop, anger quickly replacing any sadness and fear I may have previously felt. I glared at Abuela, and though she looked slightly guilty, she didn't move to apologize. She didn't even seem to notice the blood on her shoe.

"You shouldn't have done that." Papá Héctor stood up, hugging me close to him. I let myself sink into the embrace, but turned my body slightly so I could still face the rest of my family.

"Who are you to tell us how to discipline our children? You don't even know Miguel!" Mi padre exclaimed, though he didn't sound all that angry. If anything, he sounded more...cautious?

"He's just a kid! He was only trying to explain, and you wouldn't even listen to him!" Papá Héctor reprimanded, squeezing me tighter. "Not to mention he's clearly already hurt!"

"I'm not sure who you are, but you are not his father. For all we know, it was *you* who hurt him in the first place!" Mi padre accused, pointing his finger at Papá Héctor. "Miguel, get over here, right now!" Mi padre demanded, spit practically flying from his mouth.

I let my eyes shift to him, and thought about his command for a moment. "No thanks," I said calmly, pulling out the photo from my pocket.

"'No thanks!' You will listen to tu papá!" Abuela shrieked, enraged at my blatant disobedience. Apparently, she'd decided if I was okay enough to argue back, then she clearly hadn't hit me all that hard—even if the cut on my face was still bleeding, and my head was pounding worse now.

'But I don't need them. I'm going to a family that loves me, and

cares for me, and doesn't only notice me when they think I should be punished.'

So I ignored them in favor of looking up at Papá Héctor. "You ready to go home, Papá Héctor?" I asked, showing him the foto. He had blood dripping down his face as well, not that he seemed to notice.

He looked confused at my question, so I said, "Mamá Imelda thought that maybe if I wish to be with her, while holding onto you, you'll be brought along as well!" I smiled up at him, still feeling rather proud of my idea, trying to ignore how smiling kind of hurt my face now.

"Mamá Imelda! You saw her?! Where is she?" Abuela stared at me, her eyes wide.

"Ah, I see. Well, it's worth a shot!" Papá Héctor grinned back down at me, ruffling my hair.I held on tight to him, and turned away from everyone else, looking at the picture.

"Where'd you get the picture, Miguel?" I heard Rosa ask, her tone revealing she was just trying to get me into more trouble.

Instead of replying, I concentrated on imagining Mamá Imelda in my head, from her Rivera boots all the way up to her sophisticated hairstyle. I was about to say the words before I hesitated, glancing at my living family once more.

"I'll be back." I said, deciding to not explain what was about to happen; odds are they wouldn't believe me anyways. By the look on Papá Héctor's face, I could see he agreed that they deserved a little shock.

'It's not as if it'll kill them. And besides, they won't worry.' I thought bitterly, figuring if they weren't going to prevent me getting beat up, then they should have no problem with me disappearing for a night.

"Oh no, Miguel! You're not leaving this room! I won't have you running about who knows where with this no-good músico!" Mi padre shouted as Abel and Uncle Berto ran to cover the exits.

Papá Héctor and I looked at each other, before we both burst out into laughter. "You think we're just going to run off together into the sunset?" I chuckled. "I'll see you later, Papá."

"Don't let them escape!" Mi padre screeched, jolting forward.

'I appreciate the concern, Padre. But I'm a lot safer with Papá Héctor than with you.' I thought sadly, imagining my tatarabuela.

"I wish to be with Mamá Imelda."

Realizations

Miguel's POV

"I wish to be with Mamá Imelda."

I closed my eyes for a moment, only opening them when I could see a growing light behind my eyelids. This time, though, I noticed it was different. It was a radiant glow, the swirling combination of silver and gold all I could see around me; it was absolutely mesmerizing. The closest thing I could possibly describe it to was a picture of the Milky Way galaxy our teacher had shown us at school, but even that couldn't compare to its beauty.

As the light became too bright for my eyes, I closed them once more. My stomach felt strange, but this time it was more like the feeling you get when going down a hill really fast. My clothes were shifting in the wind that came with the glow, and I abruptly realized that I was still holding onto not only the foto, but Papá Héctor as well, even if I couldn't see him through the light.

The brightness eventually faded, and I blinked rapidly to get rid of the remaining spots. My dead family loudly greeted me, especially when they noticed who I brought back with me. This time, it appeared we were in what must have been the living room, which contained two large, dark brown couches, along with a huge armchair in the same shade. The wooden floor looked worn, as if it was rather old, and the beige walls were covered in black and white fotos. There was no television, but there was a gigantic radio in the corner of the room, and a dial telephone on a coffee table wedged between the two couches.

Mamá Imelda immediately jumped off the couch and raced over to us, capturing Papá Héctor in her arms. She hugged him so hard that he looked like he was going to break a rib! Papá Héctor's eyes widened much at the loving display, I was worried they would pop out! He seemed paralyzed at her reaction, but slowly wrapped his arms around her as well, a small smile forming on his face. I

grinned fondly at them as they lovingly held each other, glad he was safely back home, even though I'd miss having him in my room.

"Oh, Héctor! I thought you were gone for good!" She laid her head down on his chest for a moment, before pushing herself out of his embrace.

"If you ever worry me like that again, I'll kill you myself!" She shrieked, wagging a bony finger at him. To a stranger, she may have looked at the man like Papá Héctor had just tried to steal her purse, but I knew differently. Mamá Imelda's eyes spoke volumes, showing relief and happiness, even as she continued to scold Papá Héctor for leaving her with no note or heads up.

"I swear, Imelda, I didn't do it on purpose! Miguel, he—"

"I know, and I don't care! No more leaving! Period!" She huffed, falling back down onto the couch.

"Glad you're back, Héctor!" Tía Rosita squealed.

"Yes! Even if—" Tío Felipe began.

"You're a little worse for wear." Tío Oscar gestured to the small cracks on Papá Héctor's skull.

It was then that it sunk in what had happened. "You're a skeleton again!" I cried.

Papá Héctor immediately looked down at his hands, before feeling his face. "I am!" He exclaimed. He looked happy to be back to normal, but perhaps also a little bit sad that he was just bones again.

"But what happened to you, Miguel?" Tío Oscar pointed at me, seemingly alarmed by the blood on my face.

I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I looked to the wall in a daze, brushing my hand against the scratch gently. I stared at myself in the glass covering one of the fotos. The cut looked like it had started to scab over, but there were lines of dried blood that ran

down all the way to my neck. I knew it was *my* reflection I was seeing in the cover of a foto of Tía Rosita and Papá Julio, but...I looked much more roughed up than I had when I started the day.

"What happened?" Mamá Imelda kneeled beside me, gently cupping my uninjured cheek.

I couldn't bear to look at her, so I pulled away, my eyes dropping to the ground. "I don't want to talk about it." I muttered, clenching my mouth shut.

"Nonsense, tell me who did this—"

"Imelda." Papá Héctor interrupted her. There must have been some silent communication between them, because a few seconds later Mamá Imelda sighed. Hesitantly, I glanced up at her, relaxing a bit when she just smiled down at me, kissing my forehead.

"Come, Mijo. Let's go clean that cut, hmmm?" Tía Victoria stood up from the couch, holding her hand out to me.

I grabbed it, and let her lead me to the bathroom. I stared for a moment at her bony appendage, holding tight to my own skin-covered hand. 'Their bodies feel so weird still. Will I ever get used to it?'

She had me sit on the edge of the bathtub, and got out the same bowl Tía Rosita had used earlier today, along with a new washcloth. 'Was that really just today? It feels like weeks ago. I'm so tired.'

I struggled to keep my eyes open, and barely felt her rubbing off the dirtied blood with warm water, as she kneeled before me. She patted the cut lightly, and I did my best not to flinch away at the cold, stinging sensation.

"It's already mostly scabbed, and it doesn't look infected, so I'll leave that be." She muttered to herself, standing up. She dumped out the water, placing both the bowl and the red-stained fabric by the sink.

I blinked slowly up at her, rubbing my eyes as I fought off a yawn. She chuckled quietly, picking me up like she would a baby in one

fluid motion. I was about to protest that I wasn't a little kid, and I could walk on my own, before she started to hum. It was such a nice tune, though I couldn't quite recall where I'd heard it before.

I fought to keep my eyes open for a moment longer, but as I laid my head on her skeletal chest, I ultimately gave in to sleep.

•~•

Héctor's POV

'Poor Chamaco.' I sighed, watching Victoria lead him away.

"Out with it, Héctor. What happened?" Imelda inquired. I could see a multitude of emotions on her face, with rage, worry, and relief battling each other for dominance.

'Where do I even begin?' I groaned, hanging my head at the feeling of a headache coming on.
Gentle hands guided me to the couch, and I sat down, just now noticing how worn out I was. I wanted to close my eyes and pretend this whole night never happened, but I knew that wouldn't solve anything. Not only that, but it could be dangerous for Miguel, and after everything he'd been through...he deserved to be safe and happy.

"Elena, she...she came into Miguel's room while he was gone, looking for him so he could do his chores. But when she found me, well...sh-she dragged me downstairs. She started to hit me with her chancla, and screamed about how...how I abandoned you, Imelda." I choked out the words, swallowing a lump in my throat. I couldn't bear to look at her, or the others, so I kept my gaze locked firmly on the floor, taking note of all the grooves and scratches in the ancient wood.

"She didn't stop...not even when Miguel showed up and came between us. He was just trying to tell them the truth, but they wouldn't even listen." I wished I could cry still, if only as an outlet for the misery in my heart. 'Why is life so unfair to him? Why can't he just enjoy being a kid? I would do anything for him to have a regular childhood, like I had.'

My mind brought forth days of playing games with my family, going shopping with my mamá, and making dinner with my papá. There were moments when I missed them terribly, yes. But I wouldn't give those memories up for anything, even if remembering made me more sad than anything else sometimes.

Shaking my head, I forced myself to clear away the miserable melancholy that came with thinking of my old familia. "Elena, she...she *hit* him. With her chancla, straight across the cheek." I pursed my lips at the various gasps and muttered curses, taking comfort in the fact that I wasn't the only one who was enraged. "After that, we left. Right in front of them, actually."

I chuckled, recalling how I even spotted the man who seemed to be Miguel's padre gaping in disbelief at us teleporting away in a ball of light. "I have no idea what they must think is going on, and frankly, I don't really care. They deserve to wonder what happened for at least a few hours."

There were muttered agreements at that, even from the more forgiving Riveras. Almost all of us had children of our own, and though the chancla was sometimes used as a punishment, to use it with such force and longevity was never done. And to use it on a *child's face*? Why, if a stranger had tried that, they could very well have ended up in a shallow grave, or at the very least permanently disfigured.

"They don't *deserve* Miguel." I continued, looking up. My anger was growing exponentially as I thought over all Miguel had gone through, and how little his family seemed to understand about his life. "They didn't know or apparently care about what happened on Día de los Muertos. They didn't even know about the nightmares he has about it!" I hissed, trying and failing to comprehend how they could miss something so big.

"And they didn't know that he's bullied at school!" Imelda scoffed, crossing her arms.

"He is?!" I exclaimed, my eyes almost popping out of my skull in my surprise. Swearing colorfully, I complained, "is there nowhere that he's safe?!"

I had seen the bruises and scrapes, of course, but I'd foolishly hoped that they were from being a little clumsy in the workshop, or maybe playing with his friends. I'd forgotten how Miguel avoided the workshop like it was a charging bull. And in retrospect, I wasn't even sure how many friends Miguel had, what with the music ban in place until only recently. I would like to think kids would still befriend him even with the weird tradition, but I knew deep down how awful children could be to someone they viewed as different.

'Heck, I was made fun of a ton when I was his age because of my freakishly large nose and ears, and I could play the guitar. Miguel never even mentioned having any interests outside of music, and we've spent a day or two together at this point!'

"It appears that way." Julio sighed, answering my somewhat rhetorical question. "But maybe...maybe this can be his safe haven?" He suggested quietly, glancing around the room.

'That's not a bad idea.' I absentmindedly rubbed my goatee between my thumb and finger. 'He can get here easily enough. It's just the getting back that might be the problem. Though, as long as he has a picture of his living family, he should be fine.' I grinned, realizing that Julio's idea just might work.

"That's a great idea, Julio! He can have his own room and everything! We'll have family dinners, play songs together—"

"Now hold on a minute," Imelda interrupted with a small frown on her face. "We can have him here occasionally, yes. But who knows what kind of side effects there could be if he stays here too long? And besides, this is la Tierra de los *Muertos*. He's supposed to be enjoying his life, spending it with the...well, the *living*!" She emphasized with a sigh.

'Right. I'm not supposed to be able to see him, let alone interact with him on a regular basis. I knew that. I just...' my eyes fell to my hands folded neatly in my lap. 'I want to be there for him. I don't want to have to wait over half a century to see him again, like with Coco.'

I bit what remained of my lower lip. 'But I don't want him to die

young either!' I fought down a shudder at the mental image of Miguel being murdered in some alleyway, or worse, getting too badly hurt here to return to the Land of the Living for medical care. 'I just wish I could be a part of his life. Is that so wrong?'

"However," I looked up at Imelda, seeing the hesitance on her face. She glanced at me, and I knew she'd probably figured out what I was thinking, and was maybe having similar thoughts of her own.

I'd never been very good at hiding my emotions from those I was close to. When we were dating, Imelda usually knew what I was going to say before I even said it, which was quite sweet. 'But there were times when I wish I had a better poker face.' I mentally admitted, my thoughts drifting to the day I was going to propose to her, and she asked in the middle of our date if she could see the ring already.

'Héctor, quit thinking of the past, and focus on the present!' I berated myself, dragging my attention back to my wife as she continued to speak.

"That doesn't mean he can't stay here *sometimes*, though. But no longer than twenty-four hours!" She commanded, staring everyone down. "Heaven forbid he gets stuck here for good somehow." She shook her head, clearly worried something would go wrong.

'Which isn't entirely unfair. I mean, he's been here three times, and already he's almost died or shown up here hurt twice. If he gets hurt here, there's not a whole lot we can do to help him. There aren't any of those new fancy medical machines here, made of shiny metal and a bazillion wires.'

I could just picture Miguel falling from some great height, and Pepita not being there to catch him this time. I shivered at the thought of us only being able to stand by and comfort him as he died. His familia would never know what happened, they may not even think to put up his foto, and...I was starting to understand why Imelda was so concerned.

'We just have to be careful. I'm not going to waste this opportunity on "ifs".' I pushed away the potential outcomes, trying to convince

myself that as long as we were cautious, everything would be ok.

I yawned, a wave of exhaustion washing over me. Now that Miguel was safe, and I was back home, I was finding it difficult to keep running on empty. It had been a long two days, and I hadn't gotten more than an hour or two of sleep last night while I was watching Miguel. My eyelids drooped against my will, and I could feel bony arms wrapping around me.

Startled, I started to fight against the hold, my eyes shooting open.

"It's okay, Héctor. Rest. You are safe, mi amado." The voice was smooth as honey, and barely more than a whisper.

'Imelda'.

I relaxed, and drifted off to sleep, with one thought echoing around in my mind. 'It's been a century since I've been called amado. I...I didn't realize how much I missed it.'

I dreamt I was in a small house with my beautiful wife, and my wonderful daughter. I spent an incredible day with them talking, cleaning the house, and baking galletas. Deep down, I knew it wasn't real—that I had lost the chance to ever do this again a lifetime ago. Still, a part of me wished I could stay there forever.

If only a little.

Enrique's POV

I stared in astonishment at the bright light, desperately attempting to reach mi hijo as the wind pushed me further from him. Eventually, the glow started to fade, finally disappearing after a few minutes. And with it, Miguel.

"Where is he?!" I shouted, my eyes racing around the room for a glimpse of mi hijo. 'What just happened? What have we done? Where did my hijo go?'

I could hear through the baby monitor that little Coco had woken up, and was crying for someone to hold her and rock her back to sleep. However, at the moment, that was the least of my worries. At

least with her monitor on, I knew where she *was*, and that she was *safe.*

Instead, I turned to face my mamá. "What have you done?! You hit mi hijo with your chancla, and his face no less! You had no right to punish him!" I yelled, beyond furious that it had gone this far. "He's never gotten the chancla before, and quite frankly, he didn't deserve it!"

"Well, actually, last night..." I turned to Rosa, who shrunk back a bit at being the center of my rage.

Remembering she wasn't who I was furious with, my head turned as fast as a whip to mi mamá. "What did you do!" I hissed. My voice was cold, and hardly louder than a whisper, but I could see the way her lip wobbled as she swallowed. My mother had gone too far this time, and she *knew it.*

"He—he wouldn't listen! I—I told him to eat more, and he refused! So I...I hit him with my chancla. But only ten times! He didn't even cry!" She explained quickly, the words like lava falling from her lips. The rage that filled me as she spoke was unlike any other I'd ever experienced. It consumed me, and I knew I needed to calm myself down, before I did something I would regret.

I took a deep breath, trying to reign in the urge I had to pack up my stuff, leave with my wife and child, and never come back. 'But then I'd probably never see mi hijo again, and I can't let that happen. It's just...they sat there, and watched her beat him!' I felt disgusted by my family, the people I loved and watched over and had even helped raise in some cases. 'That they would let mi mamá punish and hurt my child, without me present...I don't even want to be in the same room as them right now.'

"He...he was actually fine, until Rosa called him a baby and stuff for asking where you and Tía Luisa were." Abel muttered, his eyes glued to the floor.

"Rosa!" Luisa scolded. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Well...he just keeps asking where you two are—" she gestured to

Luisa and I—"and I know that you're busy with the baby, so I hoped he'd get over it if he realized how childish he was being." She said slowly, fiddling with her fingers. She wouldn't look me in the eye, either, and seemed rather embarrassed about what she'd done now, at least.

'He was asking for us? Why? What could he have needed?' I tried to think back to the last time we'd talked, hoping it would help me recall what he could have wanted us for. Maybe he even gave us a clue, about where he disappeared to just now.

Unfortunately, all I could remember was him coming to our room at night a couple days ago, and us asking him to watch Coco a couple times last week.

I frowned, tuning out the sounds of mi familia muttering. 'When was the last time we really talked together? It...' I forced myself to concentrate, feeling rather ridiculous at how hard it was to draw up recent memories of spending time with mi hijo. 'Actually, when was the last time we did something together, just the three of us? The last thing I can recall was going to get ice cream in June, but it wasn't that long ago...was it?'

Worry settled heavily in my stomach. 'Have we been...ignoring him?'

Luisa and I looked at each other. Where she had been panicking like I was before at Miguel disappearing into thin air, now her face showed an even deeper despair.

"You don't think..." I trailed off, uncertain how to finish my sentence. No, that was a lie; I just couldn't bring myself to speak the words out loud.

"That we've been forgetting about Miguel?" Luisa finished weakly. I didn't like seeing her upset, but there were no words I could think of to reassure her that everything was fine, and we'd done nothing wrong. Ones that were truthful, anyway.

I groaned, tilting my head back. "We messed up. Big time." I mumbled, running my hands through my hair as I sighed deeply.

"Where...where do you think he is?" Asked Gloria, staring at the spot where we'd last seen Miguel.

"I have no idea." I confessed, hating myself a bit more as I realized just how screwed I really was. Mijo had just disappeared with a man that was meant to be *dead*, a man that seemed to *care for* and *know* Miguel better than anyone else in the room currently did.

'How on earth was Héctor even here? How did Miguel know him? How was Héctor alive? And how was he still a young adult?!'

I had countless questions, so many of which only Miguel could answer. And now, he was gone. 'I don't know how he left, or where he went, or when he'll be back!' I realized, the panic my anger had been suppressing slowly growing. I forced myself to take a few deep breaths, trying to convince myself it wasn't as bad it looked. That is, until a single thought made my face pale, and left me feeling like a spirit had just walked through my body.

'I don't even know *if* he'll be back.'

'I...I could never see him again. He could...he could *die* thinking that I—I didn't care enough to spend time with him, that I pushed him away again and again. I can't even remember the last time I told him I loved him!' I clutched my head, ashamed of how focused I'd been on Socorro. Yes, she was a baby, and I was her padre, but that was no excuse to ignore my other child!

'Dios mio, he must hate us!' I groaned, filled with distress at what I'd done. 'No wonder he ran off with Héctor. If I were a kid with...'

I didn't even want to think about the word. That nasty word I'd read about in books and seen on the news. The word that made me feel sick inside just considering its implications. I wanted to deny it, to cover it up, to forget all about my mistakes.

I knew deep down I couldn't though. I *knew* that if I wanted to have a healthy relationship with mi hijo, I'd need to face my blunders sooner rather than later, for Miguel's sake. 'If...if I were a kid with *neglectful parents*...I'd run off to anyone who was willing to spend time with me, and to love me.' I swallowed the lump in my throat.

'Even if the adult was questionably safe.'

"We've got to find him." My voice was firm, leaving no room for discussion. There was no way I was going to leave mi hijo with a man who, though he seemed nice enough, was known for abandoning people.

"Of course, but...how? We have no idea where he went, or how he left in the first place!" Mi mamá cried. I glared at her, still angry at her for what she'd done to Miguel.

"Put up posters, alert the police; give them any information we do have that doesn't make us all look *loco*. Otherwise, we...we search, and wait for him to come back." I sighed, wishing I had a better plan. 'If he comes back.' A small voice whispered in my head. I pushed the unbearable thought to the back of my mind, unwilling to even consider a future without Miguel in it.

"He hasn't eaten today, so we can make him food, for when he comes back." Rosa suggested.

"He didn't eat lunch? Or breakfast? And no one bothered to drag him down here, or see if he was okay?!" I asked, horrified at the realization that Miguel could have been hurt or even kidnapped, and no one would have known.

"We didn't want to force him to eat. We saw how well *that* went last night." Berto scoffed, glancing at mi mamá. "And we figured you guys would know if he was sick or something. I mean, he is *your* son." He motioned to Luisa and I.

I had nothing to say to that. At least, nothing besides self-criticism.

"You're right." Luisa said, rubbing her forehead. "We should have known. We've been...neglecting him, in favor of spending time with Socorro." She choked the last sentence out, like it physically pained her to say it.

I wrapped her in my arms, ignoring the growing wet spot on my shirt. "And now we'll make it *right*. Miguel will come back, and when he does, we'll show him how much we *missed him* and *love*

him." I said, my voice full of a confidence I didn't truly feel.

"We have to make this right. For Miguel."

Mornings Are Horrible

Miguel's POV

I woke to light shining across my face. 'That's strange,' I thought, shifting slightly in bed, covering my head with a pillow. 'Light doesn't shine on me from the windows usually.'

I was about to drift back off to sleep, before my eyes shot open. 'Where am I?!' I sat up quickly, looking around the room I was in. There was a window with beautiful purple drapes on the wall to the left, which looked out on a street, but it was hard to see what was out there with the sun in my eyes. A tall, wooden dresser stood in the corner of the room, with detailed carvings of leaves and roses on it. There was even a vanity against the wall facing the bed that had a few bottles on it, and three long, violet ribbons.

I didn't bother to investigate the rest of the room, instead focusing on the strips of fabric. 'I know I've seen those somewhere....' I mentally struggled as I tried to discover why they seemed so familiar. 'Purple hair ribbons, who wears—oh! Those are Mamá Imelda's! So that must mean—' I glanced down at the white bedsheets around me, noticing the intricate floral designs on them in gold.

"This must be Mamá Imelda's room! I'm in la Tierra de los Muertos!"

I marveled at the strange situation, realizing how weird it was that I had technically been sleeping in a dead person's bed. Like, were all beds here technically coffins...? My living family would definitely—

My eyes widened as I remembered the events from last night. I was about to jump off the bed and run downstairs to say hi to my dead familia, when I heard a groan from beside me. Startled, I yelped, which woke the other occupant of the bed completely; the occupant I had somehow failed to notice until just then.

"Let me sleeeeeeep." The person beside me mumbled. The voice was

quiet, and hard to hear, but I knew I'd recognize it anywhere—well, that and his floppy hair.

"¿¡Papá Héctor?!" I shouted, a grin breaking out across my face.

Papá Héctor bolted into a sitting position when he heard me. His eyes almost fell out of his skull, they were rolling around so quickly, before finally settling on me. He flashed his pearly whites, his gold tooth shining brightly in the sunlight. "Chamaco!" He cried, gathering me into a hug so tight I couldn't take a breath without my ribs creaking, and my bruises aching horribly.

"Can't—breathe—" I wheezed, black spots edging my vision.

Papá Héctor immediately let go of me, and I gulped in air, coughing every time I fought to fill my lungs. He placed his hands on my shoulders, muttering apologies as I struggled to calm my erratic heartbeat.

"Easy, Mijo, easy." He soothed, rubbing circles on my back as he muttered apologies. I took comfort in the physical touch, and could practically feel every tense muscle in my body relaxing under his bones. After the past couple of weeks I'd had, it felt good to know I was safe, and that everything was fine, if just for a moment.

It'd felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders ever since Día de los Muertos. First it was getting the blessing, then getting Papá Héctor's foto on the ofrenda, then making sure he wasn't forgotten, then trying to clear his name. 'The list goes on and on! I —I can't do this anymore!' I swallowed the lump in my throat, wishing I could hide from the world under the bed covers and never come back out.

'I don't know what to do! I'm just a kid!' I sniffled, trying to fight back tears. 'How am I supposed to do this all on my own?'

I looked up at Papá Héctor, wondering if he had any advice. He was still rubbing my back though, and was saying something else besides the same calming mantras now.

"It's alright, Mijo, I've got you. I'm here. It'll be fine. I'm not going

anywhere." He whispered quietly, patting my back a few times before wrapping his arms around me again. Sighing, I melted into his arms like honey, choosing to allow myself to enjoy this moment.

I took a deep breath as I rested my head against his shoulder. 'Maybe...maybe I don't have to do this all on my own. Maybe...mi familia will help me.' I considered, thinking about how they never stopped trying to get me home when I was cursed, though it was dangerous for them at times; of how mi familia didn't scold me for showing up with injuries, like my living family would have. Instead, Tía Rosita and Tía Victoria were both so gentle as they took care of me. They even carried me when I was tired, and put me to bed.

'They're there for me when my living family isn't, when I needed help, and didn't think I'd receive it. Maybe that's what family is. Not just there to support you in your dreams, but there to pick you up after your nightmares as well.'

I flinched at the door banging open, the loud noise startling me. Luckily, Papá Héctor was still holding me, or I probably would have jumped off the bed in shock. I chuckled when I realized it was just Mamá Imelda entering the room, wondering how I forgot that this wasn't actually my or Papá Héctor's bed.

"What's wrong? I heard a scream!" She exclaimed, rushing over to me. "Are you okay, Miguel? Is your head hurting? Are you sick? Hungry?" She asked, spewing questions too fast for me to answer.

I could see her reaching for my head, most likely to check if I was fine herself. I brushed her hands away with a small chuckle, secretly happy at the concern on her face. 'It's nice to know someone cares,' a dark part of me whispered.

"I'm good, Mamá Imelda," I reassured her, giving her my best grin. Unfortunately, that pulled on the cut I forgot about, making me wince, which only served to worry her more.

"Really." I insisted, ignoring the lingering pain. "I was just surprised when I found Papá Héctor next to me," I explained, gesturing to the man behind me who was falling asleep again.

Mamá Imelda looked at Papá Héctor in surprise for a moment, as if she'd forgotten that it wasn't just me and her in the room. She smiled sadly at her husband when she saw his eyes closing again. I raised my hand to shake him awake, weirded out by how tired he seemed.

"Don't, Mijo," Mamá Imelda whispered, grabbing me gently. I glanced at her, confused.

"He...he needs rest. To heal. He still hasn't fully healed after Día de los Muertos, and I imagine that the past couple days have been rather...taxing."

It looked like the words pained her, and I realized that she, to some degree, probably felt guilty for his condition. I was about to tell her that it wasn't her fault, that **he** was to be blamed for Papá Héctor's state, but before I could, she plastered a big smile on her face.

"Come, Miguel." She dragged me by my arm out of the room, closing the door behind us. "You must be hungry."

We hurried down the stairs, and she led me to the bathroom, before we both followed the wonderful aroma of cooking food. She ushered me into the kitchen, making a beeline for the table. It was almost robotic, the way she sat me down in a chair and put a plate with burritos on it in front of me.

'Not that I'm complaining.' I licked my lips, practically drooling. I was surprised at how hungry I was, until I remembered I'd had an early dinner last night. However, I restrained myself, making sure to wait until everyone else was sitting down and had food before eagerly digging in.

"Slow down, Miguel! We wouldn't want you to choke." Papá Julio said with a chuckle. I grinned sheepishly, realizing I was eating like a hungry pig.

"It's very good," I remarked, sitting up a bit straighter in my seat. "Who made it?"

"Ah, you have your Tía Rosita to thank for breakfast." Mamá Imelda

frowned slightly, as if she seemed a bit bitter about this fact.

"Oh, come now. You're a good cook!" Tía Rosita said, smiling at her cuñada.

"Be honest, Rosita: have you ever actually *tasted* my cooking?" Mamá Imelda asked, stabbing a bite of stray huevos.

Tía Rosita pondered that for a minute, a confused expression making its way onto her face. "I...I don't think I've ever had the pleasure." She confessed, seeming surprised. "Do you not like to cook?"

"It's not so much she doesn't *like* to cook—" Tío Oscar began.

"—but that she *can't* cook." Tío Felipe grinned.

"Oh, she's tried! Many times, actually." Tío Oscar looked at his brother. "Do you think we can remember them all?"

"The time she dented the pan."

"The time she set off the new smoke alarm."

"The time she tried making pan dulce, and they came out black."

"The time she burned down half the kitchen."

"The time she—"

"They get the point!" Mamá Imelda interrupted, scowling at them both. "I can't cook," she admitted, gripping the table tightly.

Her brothers opened their mouths, but before they could interrupt, she shot them a vicious look, making them wilt slightly. "Or bake." She continued, crossing her arms in what was clearly a defensive posture.

"Don't get me wrong, I've tried. Many times, as mis hermanos are so eager to point out." She glared at her brothers for a moment longer, then sighed defeatedly. "Those two—" she gestured to the twins —"always had to cook for us. Until Rosita came along, that is."

"Maybe I could teach you?" Rosita suggested, grabbing her hand. Mamá Imelda smiled at Rosita, but shook her head.

"Believe me, it's hopeless—I'm a lost cause." She gave a little shrug, an amused smile making its way across her face. "I can't tell you how many hours I've spent trying, how much time Héctor and I..." she trailed off, and in her eyes I could tell she was no longer sitting at the table with us. She was in a different kitchen, probably a smaller one, with her husband and young daughter. A kitchen gone in all but memories.

"Mamá Imelda," I said slowly, trying to pull her back to the present. She glanced at me, and for a moment, it felt like she wasn't seeing me, so much as seeing *through* me. I thought back briefly to that fright-filled night, and how horrifying it was to discover my parents couldn't see me.

But then Mamá Imelda shook her head slightly, sighing again. "I'm sorry, sometimes it's just...hard," she bit her lip, letting go of Tía Rosita. "It's been so long..." she grimaced, and I had a feeling that she was thinking of all the times that she had pushed Papá Héctor away; what he must have gone through, year after year, trying desperately to see his daughter one more time.

"Mamá Imelda, it wasn't your fault. You couldn't have known that...that **he** murdered Papá Héctor." My voice was firm, and I looked her in her warm brown eyes as I spoke.

"I should have though!" Mamá Imelda groaned, her face pained. "I should have known! He sent letters every week, letters pages long! He gave us money, more than enough to feed us and clothe us and —and—" she gave a small cry, her head falling into her hands.

"The money and the letters stopped a few months after he left," She muttered, hiding her face in her shaking fingers. "I...I should have known something happened to him. I should have looked for him, tried to find out what happened. But the townspeople—" she moaned, running her hands through her messy hair—"they *gossiped*, and rumors spread about how...how Héctor left me for a prettier woman, for a more luxurious life.

"And slowly..." Her voice was so quiet, my ears strained to pick up the words. "As the months passed, and the money ran out, and no more letters came...I started to *believe* their speculations." She admitted, her eyebrows scrunched up tight.

"I should have searched for him. I should have known he'd come back! But, I didn't. I built the shoe shop, with the help of my brothers. I didn't want to remember him, but that alone wasn't enough. I wanted everyone to *forget him*. And once I came here—" she gestured vaguely around her—"I avoided him like the plague. I didn't pause to think, to *realize*...that he was disappearing, before my very eyes.

"And now..." She trailed off, her shoulders drooping, as if they carried the weight of much more than just her dress. "Now, he's here with us, again. And being forgotten for over a century...it takes its toll. I just hope, with time, he gets better." She finished in a small voice, one that I would never have thought I'd hear my fierce, willful Mamá Imelda use.

I could see the guilt that was eating at her, feeding off of the horror and anguish she felt at what she'd done. I couldn't stand to see her so upset. I jumped out of my chair, raced over to her, and wrapped my arms tightly around her bony body. "It's alright now, Mamá Imelda. Everything's going to be fine. Papá Héctor is upstairs sleeping, and he's not going anywhere. And—and 'm going to make sure the world knows what a fake that—that **Ernesto** is." I spat out the name, hating the bitter taste it left in my mouth.

"But how?! I threw away everything! The letters, and his photo, and all of his stuff!" Mamá Imelda cried, gripping me back with all her strength.

"About that..." I chuckled nervously, leaning back. "Mamá Coco actually kept it." I winced slightly. 'Probably could have sugar-coated that a bit more. Oh well. Too late now.'

I looked anxiously at Mamá Imelda, trying to gauge her reaction. She seemed shocked, and was silent for a long time, before she smiled softly.

Chuckling, she gave me one final squeeze, before ushering me gently back to my seat. "She always was a little rebel, wasn't she?" Mamá Imelda said fondly. "In fact," she gestured to Papá Julio, a small smirk on her face. "Wasn't that how she met you? Singing together in the plaza?"

Papá Julio looked nervous as he rubbed the back of his neck. "I..." He trailed off, and I knew whatever came out of his mouth next would be a lie. "Can't remember." He finished. I had no doubt that if he were still alive, he would be sweating bullets.

Mamá Imelda's eyebrows rose. "Of course, of course. It was a long time ago." Her eyes gleamed, a light in them that reminded me of how Abel looked when he was teasing Rosa.

'She's just messing with him! She's not really angry.' I thought incredulously, amazed at the scene before me. I'd heard all the stories about how strict and hardworking Mamá Imelda was, but I'd never once heard a story about any other side of her. I watched as Papá Julio stared warily at Mamá Imelda, his eyes narrowed as he attempted to read her expression.

'Though, perhaps that's because she couldn't afford to be anything *but* hard. I mean, a single mother back then with no way to support her and her daughter would have had it pretty rough.' I frowned slightly, imagining what it must have been like for her, trying to earn enough money each day just to feed little Mamá Coco, let alone clothe her and find shelter for them both.

Mamá Imelda finally smirked, apparently satisfied with her little victory. Papá Julio looked confused for a moment, before his expression twisted into something more sullen. "You know I'm not good at being able to tell when you're joking." He whined as we laughed at his expense.

"Oh come on, Julio. After all this time, you're still scared of me?" Mamá Imelda rolled her eyes, clearly amused.

"...no." Papá Julio sounded unsure of himself, like he didn't quite believe what he said.

Mamá Imelda laughed under her breath, but took pity on him, and didn't push the subject further. "I should probably go check on Héctor, and maybe bring him some food. I swear, he never eats!" Mamá Imelda shook her head, clearly exasperated.

"Do you guys...have to eat?" I asked hesitantly, hoping I didn't come across as rude. 'I mean, it's not as if they'll actually starve or anything.'

"Technically, no." Tía Victoria answered, adjusting her glasses. "However, it's good for us to. It keeps our bones whiter, harder to break, and the connection between them stronger."

I must have looked confused, because Mamá Imelda rolled her eyes. "She means eating makes it harder for our bones to separate."

"Oh." I thought back to how I'd accidentally pulled Papá Héctor's arm from his body at the beginning of Día de los Muertos. "Is that why Papá Héctor comes apart so easily?"

"Partly," Tía Victoria sighed. "The other problem is...the less people remember you in the living world, the less you are tethered to la Tierra de los Muertos. And with just Mamá Coco's fraying memory..." she trailed off, glancing down.

"But I can fix that!" I beamed. "My family on the other side know about him now, and I can prove that Papá Héctor is the one who wrote *Remember Me* and all the other songs. And I will!"

"Even with the letters, that's an awfully big project." Tío Oscar said.

"People aren't going to like finding out their idol is a murderer and a fake either." Tío Felipe added, giving me a concerned look.

My shoulders slumped, and I ran my fingers over the grain marks on the table. "I know, but I have to try. I can't stand seeing statues of **him** all over Santa Cecilia, watching everyone practically worship **him** like **he**'s some sort of god." I grimaced, finding it hard to believe that I was a fan of the man only a month ago.

"Can I bring up Papá Héctor's breakfast with you?" I asked Mamá Imelda eagerly, not all that keen on anyone trying to change my

mind. 'I know what I'm doing, and I'm not going to let anyone stop me from clearing Papá Héctor's name.

Mamá Imelda blinked at the sudden change of subject, before giving me a warm smile. "Of course, Mijo."

She moved fluidly around the table, gathering different foods onto a plate. I followed her up the stairs, where she opened the door to her room with a slight squeak.

Immediately, the sound of snoring reached our ears, causing Imelda to chuckle. "He's snored for as long as I've known him, but every time I mention it, he denies it!" She whispered to me, rolling her eyes.

I laughed, feeling a little wistful as I recalled, "Sounds like my papá. Mamá's always telling him he snores, but he always claims she's lying."

Shaking our heads at our disbelieving relatives, we walked into the room, shutting the door behind us. Setting aside some books, Mamá Imelda placed the dish on the bedside table, moving carefully to avoid making any unnecessary noise.

Sitting down on the edge of the mattress, we both winced as it creaked due to the extra weight; it probably wasn't really made to hold living humans, which wasn't something either of us had apparently considered. But we needn't have worried, because Papá Héctor continued sleeping, with no indication he'd even heard the sound.

"He's a deep sleeper too, I take it." I murmured.

"Not usually, actually." Mamá Imelda admitted, sounding concerned. "Though I suppose he's just tired," she suggested, giving me a weak smile.

"I'm positive that's what it is." I assured her. I tried to convince myself I believed in my words, one hundred percent, but I knew deep down I didn't. In the depths of my head, a voice I didn't dare listen to cackled:

'And if he isn't....?'

I shoved the thought back to the dark corner it belonged to, and forced myself to think of something else, anything else—like my new little sister! I visualized her chubby cheeks, her small hands, and her cute, bubbly laugh. I beamed at the mental image of her, remembering how nice it was to hold her while she slept.

'It's not her fault she steals my parents'—' my train of thought abruptly stopped as my eyes widened.

"Mamá Imelda!" I hissed. "I spent the night here!"

"I already knew that," her grin was a bit stronger, but it faded when she saw the fear on my face. "What is it, Miguel?"

"My family—well, my living one—they don't know where I am!" I hissed. I knew I sounded frantic, but I couldn't bring myself to care. They had to have noticed that I was gone this time, considering how I left—and I could only imagine how furious they would be at me for disappearing for so long. Sure, last night I'd kind of wanted them to be annoyed, but—I glanced at the clock—*twelve hours* was pushing it.

Mamá Imelda grimaced, realizing how bad the situation was. She pushed me out of the room, closing the door behind us. "We've got to get you back. Quickly! Even if your parents do deserve to worry a bit in my opinion." She smirked wryly, muttering some unsavory things under her breath.

"But how?! Last time I got here because I had a picture with Papá Héctor in it, and he was in the living world. I don't *have* a picture of my living family with me." I cried, waving around my empty hands.

I felt nauseous as I grabbed the foto from my pocket. Tears came to my eyes when I imagined staying here forever. 'No one will ever know the truth about **Ernesto**. They'll never know how Papá Héctor wrote all those songs.' I looked up at Mamá Imelda. 'I'll have to wait decades to see my family again.'

"Mamá Imelda, will I—will I ever be able to go home?"

Hope yet

Uh...hi? Sorry it's been so long. I could give you a whole bunch of excuses like school and being sick and stuff, but if I'm being honest I wasn't entirely sure how to write this chapter. I've spent hours trying to get it just right, and i think this is the best it's ever going to get. So enjoy, and please review:)

Miguel's POV

"What are we going to do?" I couldn't keep the despair out of my voice. 'Sure, my family may not have been the kindest lately, but that doesn't mean I don't ever want to see them again!'

I ran my hands through my hair, trying to calm down. "Maybe there's another way I can get back." I suggested, my eyes widening with my growing hope. "Maybe I can cross the bridge!"

Mamá Imelda shook her head with a wince. "The bridge only appears once a year." She said. "And that won't be for over three-hundred days from now!"

"There must be some way!" I insisted, wiping at the tears falling down my cheeks. Crying wasn't going to help anyone right now, and I was determined to be useful for once.

'I have to concentrate! Maybe there's some other way I can go back...' I took a deep breath, forcing myself to relax. I took more breaths until I finally felt in control, the silence of the hallway helping immensely.

Looking up, I saw Mamá Imelda pacing as she muttered quietly, flicking her fingers like she was discarding errant ideas. I knew she was trying to think of a way to send me back, and I also knew I should be trying to focus on that as well. However, watching her being so serious now, I couldn't help but remember the foto on the ofrenda that we put up every year, the one with her, Papá Héctor, and Mamá Coco—

"That's it!" I pumped a fist into the air, a large grin breaking out across my face.

"What? Have you figured out a way to get back home?"

She spoke so fast I could barely understand what she was saying, but I nodded, leaning forward in my excitement. "You take the stuff off of the ofrenda and bring it back here, right?"

Mamá Imelda's eyebrows scrunched up. "Sí. But how would that help you?"

"If you took a foto, I can use that to get back home!" I elaborated, hoping she'd make the connection.

Mamá Imelda seemed mystified for a moment more, before it suddenly dawned on her, and she smiled down at me. "We can use my foto! Coco is still alive, so if you wish to be with her—"

"Exactly!" I said, relieved that we had a plan. "Where is it?"

Her eyes trailed to the stairs. "It should be down in the workshop; I like to look at it every once in a while. It's sometimes hard, not having her here. I miss her more than—" Mamá Imelda cut herself off with a sigh, biting her lip.

I smiled, imagining how hard it must be for her. "It's alright, Mamá Imelda. I understand. I still have vague memories of when Mamá Coco knew me for me, when I was younger."

I blinked back more tears, trying to hold onto the feeling of hope. "Most days now she confuses me with Papá Julio. I know it's because of her old age, and I know the chances of her memory getting better are slim, but I still pray for her to remember better every night." I confessed, my mind wandering to the days when I would sit on Mamá Coco's lap, and she would read me stories.

I almost flinched at the feeling of Mamá Imelda's arms wrapping around me. "It's alright, Miguel. One day, a long way away from now, you'll come here, and she'll be here too. Then, we can all enjoy each other's company again." She reassured me, patting my back.

"Or..." I pulled back from the hug, practically bouncing on the balls of my feet. "I can visit you guys here! Since I have these cool powers now!" I exclaimed.

Mamá Imelda seemed to ponder that for a moment, before shrugging. "I don't see why not. As long as you don't stay here too long, or forget that your real life is meant to be with the living." She emphasized the last few words, as if she knew I liked la Tierra de los Muertos better than the Land of the Living.

"Of course, of course," I muttered, offering her a sheepish grin. Mamá Imelda just rolled her eyes and gave me a fond look, before grimacing slightly.

"We should really get you home now though, Mijo." She reminded me, grabbing my hand.

She led me down the stairs and out the back door to the workshop, shielding me as best she could to avoid me being seen. At first, I was a little offended she didn't want her neighbors to see me, until I remembered the chaos that was caused by a 'living boy' being in la Tierra de los Muertos. 'As nice as it is to be able to come and visit them freely, I'm sure the family doesn't want to advertise this gift of mine.'

I looked around the building as we walked in, amazed at how similar it was to the one back home. Mamá Imelda practically marched me to her work station, picking up the framed foto. Removing the back, she paused, before placing it gently in my hands as I gave her the wedding foto. She froze for a moment, then lunged forward, giving me a tight hug. I knew it'd probably be a while until I saw her again, so I matched her strength, trying to make the moment last for as long as possible.

After several seconds, she pulled back until just her hands were on my shoulders. Smiling down at me, she said, "I'll give your goodbyes to the rest of la familia. I—" she swallowed, huffing out a slightly sad laugh.

"Till next time, Miguel. Te amo." She whispered, kissing my forehead.

"Till next time," I repeated, beaming up at her. I took a deep breath, trying to mentally prepare myself for what I would find when I got back home. I didn't know how mad my parents would be, or how Abuela would react to my having whisked Papá Héctor away. But it was time to face the music.

'Metaphorically, that is.'

Closing my eyes, I softly murmured the words:

"I wish to be with Mamá Coco."

I felt the familiar tug in my stomach as I was pulled to the realm of the living. The flash was gold again, but didn't seem to last as long this time, which I thought was kind of weird. 'Maybe it's because it's only me this time? Or maybe my power is getting stronger every time I use it?'

Shrugging, I placed the small foto in my pocket, setting the thought aside for later inspection. It was dark in Mamá Coco's room, but there seemed to be light coming in from the bottom of the window. Hearing a small gasp from behind me, I whipped around to see who had startled me.

"Julio?" Mamá Coco's voice was quiet, and the brittleness of it betrayed her age. She was sitting in her wheelchair, a shawl around her shoulders to keep her warm. I gave her a small smile, and rubbed my eyes, trying to remind myself that Mamá Coco still loved me, even though she couldn't remember me anymore.

"Hola, Mamá Coco. How are you?" I asked her, giving her a hug. I felt her thin arms envelop me shakily, and when I left the warm embrace, I was delighted to see the large grin on her face.

"I'm good. A bit tired, though," she yawned. She closed her eyes, and I knew she was probably going to fall asleep, if she wasn't already. I kissed her cheek, planning in silence as I listened to her quiet breaths.

'Maybe if I just go to my room, and come out, I can pretend like I was there the whole time? I mean, it sounds unbelievable, but it's

still a lot better than trying to convince them I was in la Tierra de los Muertos. And I could have been under the bed, or sneaked up to the attic.'

Nodding to myself, I tiptoed out of Mamá Coco's room, making my way down the hall to my own. I was halfway to my room when I froze at the sight of Rosa leaving her room, muttering something I couldn't quite make out. She seemed to be in a bad mood, so I decided to stay out of her way and not try to pick a fight with her.

Unfortunately, as I went to quietly slip by her in the large hall, she looked up at me, stumbling away with a gasp. 'That's a bit much; there's no way I can look or smell *that* bad,' I thought, hurt momentarily at her reaction, before I noticed she wasn't just messing with me. If anything, she looked genuinely shocked, if her wide eyes and gaping mouth were anything to go by. I'd never seen Rosa too stunned to speak, and it was...a weird mix of terrifying and amusing.

"M-Miguel?" She finally stammered, her voice sounding so small and almost...hopeful?

'Why is she happy to see me?' I thought. 'She practically hates me; all she does is tease me and make me miserable. So why—oh. She probably just needs to borrow something from me.' I reasoned, relaxing a bit. 'I probably just imagined her shock.'

"Yeah? What is it?" I asked hesitantly, slightly anxious about what she wanted. Really, there was very little I had that she hadn't had first dibs on, and nothing I owned that she had ever shown interest in.

Rosa took a small step forward, slowly reaching out her hand. I glanced at her warily, wondering if she'd somehow gone crazy in the twelve hours I was gone. Her finger poked my shoulder with a feather-light touch, and for a second, we both stood frozen.

Then she broke into a loud, ugly sob so quickly I couldn't help but flinch back, my arms held out in front of me to...comfort? Protect? I honestly wasn't sure what the *heck* was going on.

"Tío Enrique! Tía Luisa! He's back! Miguel's back!" She yelled, pulling me into a tight hug. This time I was gaping, wondering what on earth was happening. Why was Rosa, the cousin who usually gave me the most grief, gripping me as tightly as a boa constrictor with its prey?

I could hear footsteps pounding on the wooden stairs, and suddenly there were more arms around me, holding me. It was almost suffocating, all the voices and sensations that were abruptly dumped on me, and I had to remind myself that this was my family, and not some—some guards, or bullies, trying to hurt me.

After much wriggling, I was finally able to successfully free myself from their grasps, panting at the effort it took to get out of the family hug. I looked up, quickly realizing it wasn't just my parents and Rosa who had been hugging me. It was *everyone*. And they all looked...worried?

"What's wrong? Did I miss something?" I asked, more confused than I'd ever been in my whole life, which was really saying something at this point. 'It's not as if I was even gone for a whole day.' I thought, trying to figure out why they looked so concerned. 'Though I did disappear with my dead relative brought back to life...in a flash of light.' I winced, realizing that was probably why they all looked like I'd been kidnapped or something.

"Where did you go?"

"How did you know that man?"

"How did you do that light thing?"

"Are you going to leave again?"

"Did you summon him from the dead?"

"Are you okay?"

'So many questions.' I blinked, trying to decipher what was being said. I couldn't tell exactly who was saying what, but they all seemed to be wondering about what happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Eventually, all the noise started getting annoying, as my family started shouting over each other in an attempt. I put my hands over my ears, the noise becoming a roar that sent stabs of pain into my head.

"Quiet!" I shouted as loud as I could, much louder than I ever was inside the house. Instantly, the voices stopped, leaving only the faint sound of ringing behind. Sighing in relief, I ran my hand through my hair, the tension leaking from my shoulders. "Thank you. Now, I know you're all wondering about what's happened in the past day. And I'll tell you. But..."

I pursed my lips, glancing up at my relatives warily. "You have to understand that what I'm going to say will sound completely crazy."

"Crazier than teleporting?!" Abel's voice was spastic, his arms flown outwards to emphasize his point. I tapped my fingers on my leg, avoiding his eyes.

"Parts of it, yes." I sighed again, finding it hard to summon the energy I knew I'd need to tell them what had happened.

"It's a long story, though. Do you think we could maybe take this to the living room?" I glanced hopefully at my parents. They actually looked really worried, though I didn't see why. 'They've practically been ignoring me since Socorro was born, unless I act out enough to get their attention.'

I grimaced at the ugly thought, knowing that that way of thinking wasn't very fair. Babies took a lot of work, and I knew that even before little Coco was born; I'd helped watch the twins after all. I just...hadn't quite realized that meant I'd stop seeing my parents basically ever, unless I sought them out.

"Of course, Miguel." Mi padre said, his voice soft. His eyes glanced at my scarred cheek for a moment, before shooting over to Abuela with a fire in them I'd never seen in my life. However, the glare lasted only a second, interrupted as it was by him visually seeking me out. It was almost like he was...scared, in a way, to let me out of his sight.

Kneeling in front of me, he placed his hand on the bandage on my head. He slowly unwrapped it, and I forced myself not to flinch at the loud gasp he gave when the cut was revealed.

"How did this happen?"

His voice was deadly quiet, and I knew I'd never seen him this angry before. Sure, there were definitely times he was annoyed or disappointed, and I'd even witnessed him getting mad at a customer once or twice. But mi padre was usually pretty easy-going and calm, so to see him so *enraged* was...strange.

I tried desperately to think of a believable excuse, one that wouldn't lead to my father trying to send Jake and his friends to juvie. Staring at the floor, I took a deep breath, hoping I could be at least somewhat convincing.

"I wasn't watching where I was going in the workshop a couple days ago, and I tripped and fell. I hit my head on the ground, and it was pretty late, so I figured I would just deal with it on my own." I tried to keep my voice steady, and not fidget as I looked up. "The nurse at school cleaned it for me, and gave me some bandages, so it's fine!"

I finished the little act with a grin, the one that always seemed to set people at ease. Mi papá's face was eerily blank, but I could tell that everyone else seemed to think I was telling the truth. After all, my teachers never mentioned anything about fighting at school or bullies; they'd have to notice it first, and *that* certainly hadn't happened yet.

Overall, I thought I had gotten away with it. No one was speaking up, or refuting my claim. But then—then—

Mi padre put his palm against my cheek. "Look at me, Mijo. Please." I took a deep breath, before slowly bringing my eyes to his. I focused on keeping still. I couldn't panic now, couldn't break, couldn't give in—

"What really happened?"

His question was little more than a whisper, and I was reminded of when I was little, and he used to comfort me after I crashed my bike, or fell from trees. 'It was so simple back then.' I thought wistfully, wishing I could go back for just one day, to try to remember what it was like when the most important thing was scoring a goal or what was for dinner. To remember what life was like before bullies and parents who aren't around and would-be serial killers.

"I—I fell," I insisted, trying to ignore the way my words only seemed to make mi papá sadder. "It's really not as bad as it looks, and—"

"Miguel—"

"And why do you even care, huh?" I rubbed my wet nose on my sleeve, suddenly feeling defensive. "What's the difference between the cut on my cheek, and the one on my forehead?"

Mi padre flinched back at that, and I told myself I didn't care as his hand moved away. I didn't. I didn't need him to love me like he used to, not now that I had Papá Héctor.

But then he stood up, and pulled me into a tight hug again, and it...it felt *nice*. And maybe I was still angry and upset, and I—

"Everyone but Luisa needs to go downstairs, please." Mi padre interrupted my thoughts. The words themselves, while phrased like a request, had a weight to them that made me think they were more like a command.

My thought was only more supported when, instead of hearing angry disputes and objections, I heard the sound of everyone slowly making their way past me. With my face in mi papá's shirt, I couldn't tell quite how he managed to send even Abuela away, but when he finally loosened his hold on me, it was just my parents and I left.

And then, mi padre did something I really didn't expect: he sat down, dragging me to the ground with him. I blinked, frowning at the sight of both of my parents just sitting in front of me on the

hardwood floor, like I was some sort of toddler they were waiting to see walk for the first time. But instead of looking hopeful, they were —they were *crying.* There were actual *tears* on mi padre's face!

"Mijo, I...I'm sorry."

I stared at mi padre, barely noticing when mi madre echoed his words.

"*What?*"

"We should never have let Abuela punish you like that," he said, leaning forward. "You need to know that we did *not* give her permission, ever, to treat you like that. Neither of us knew that she had...had used her *chancla*, until last night."

"But we should have," mi madre continued, grabbing my hand. "We should have been at dinner, and at breakfast yesterday, and all the other meals we've missed so far. It's our fault for putting you in a situation that led to you being hurt, and we're sorry for that."

I shook my head, failing to process what they were saying. "You...you would have stopped it from happening? But—but she's Abuela!" I waved my free arm around, trying to make them understand how crazy what they were saying was.

Mi padre pursed his lips, the vein near his temple practically pulsing. "She may be your Abuela, but she had no right to go over our heads and punish you like that—*especially* for something as little as not eating."

"And we promise that it won't happen again. Not under our watch." Mi madre's voice was firm, the same tone she used when she told me to take out the trash and wanted it done right away.

It was...weird. I had been so convinced that somehow they knew about the punishment, that they just didn't care about what had happened in their absence, that I had started to believe they *approved* of it. But to see them so earnestly telling me that they would stop it from happening again...

I didn't know if it was better, or worse. Because if they didn't want

me punished like that, then they would have stopped it before, if they'd been at dinner. But I also wouldn't have gotten to see Papá Héctor again, which was amazing, or discover my new powers. I hated seeing him get hurt though, and knowing that it was my fault, well...

It was all so confusing, to say the least.

"This cut—" mi padre gently trailed his fingers along my forehead—"matters just as much as this one." He finished, rubbing just under the scab on my cheek.

"So please, Mijo. Tell us the truth."

I sighed, realizing mis padres weren't going to let this go anytime soon. I could give them a little information, and hopefully it would be enough for now. "It—it's nothing important. Just some bullies from school." I muttered, pulling my hand away so I could fidget with the edge of my jacket. "It doesn't matter. It's only a few idiotas, and I can handle it."

"But you shouldn't have to." Mi padre said, grabbing my wrists. "It's bad enough that tu mamá and I have been so occupied with Socorro that we've been...ignoring you. And I'm sorry for that, too; there is no excuse I could give that would make what we did ok. But you need to—I need to—" Mi padre cut himself off as he hugged me. I tensed in shock for a moment, before forcing myself to relax and enjoy the feeling of safety his embrace brought me. I slowly wrapped my arms around him, fighting back tears.

'I can't remember the last time he's hugged me first. I...I should try to stay super still, so he won't let go.' I thought, trying not to move an inch. I couldn't help but hope that he would start spending more time with me now, even if it was just a few minutes every once in a while. 'Maybe this means they will change, that we can start having outings together again, or even just a couple hours playing a game or two.'

"I'm so sorry, Mijo." Mi madre said, joining the hug. "I should have noticed what you were going through, but I didn't. I got so caught up in taking care of Socorro that I neglected you and your needs,

and—"

I pulled myself from their arms, looking up at them. "She needs you more—" I interrupted, but mi padre shook his head.

"I know you may not understand now, but you are still *so young*. You need someone to help you, to watch over you, to instruct you. Maybe not as much as a baby, but far more than what tu mamá and I have been giving you. And I'm so very sorry for not making that time."

Mi papá's voice was sincere, and his pained expression could not have possibly been faked. I felt a twinge in my chest at the knowledge that *I* was the source of his pain. 'I just want them to spend time with me, not get all depressed!'

"It's fine, Papá." I quickly tried to reassure him, not able to stand seeing his wet eyes any longer. "I understand. Besides, I've had Papá Héctor—" I quickly shut my mouth, realizing my mistake too late. Mis padres shared a look that I couldn't decipher, but luckily, they didn't seem as angry at the mention of his name as Abuela had. Instead, they took my words as a cue to stand up, mi papá practically hoisting me up from under my arms.

"Come, Miguel. We should wash that cut. And where did you get these bandages? I doubt the nurse would have bandaged you up without calling us, and we don't have any like these at home." Mi mamá commented as she studied the dated cloth. I could understand her confusion, as the bandages looked a lot thicker and heavier than those used these days.

"Weellll...it's kinda complicated..." I trailed off, not sure how to tell them that they were from their dead relatives. Honestly, it would probably make more sense if I'd made them out of old rags or something that I'd found lying around.

"Miguel?" Mi padre prompted, his voice going lower, as if he suspected that I'd gotten them illegally or something.

"I...promise you'll believe me?"

Mi padre frowned. "Of course, Miguel. After what all happened last night, it's pretty safe to say there's very little that could surprise me anymore."

"I kinda got them from...Tía Rosita." I mumbled, rubbing my neck nervously.

"How? She's dead!" He exclaimed, gaping at me. "She's been dead for over twenty years! Did she—did she come back too, like Héctor?"

"Ah, no. Like I said earlier, it's a long story...but to put it simply, I was kinda a dead man walking, for a while." My laugh sounded anxious, even to my own ears.

"You—

"*What?!*"

I flinched, not having noticed Abuela coming back up the stairs.

"*Mamá, you were supposed to stay downstairs—*"

"W-well, I—I don't exactly know where to begin." I stuttered apprehensively, worried if I said the wrong thing she'd get angry at me, or even just think I was making this all up. "Can—can we talk about this in the living room? I think the whole family is going to need to hear this." I suggested with a weak smile, glancing between her and mi padre. I didn't want them to fight, or be the reason that they were on bad terms, but...if anyone was going to help me if things got messy, it would be mis padres.

Abuela sighed deeply, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Fine," she consented. "The living room, in ten minutes. Everyone else is getting something to eat, and Franco has already closed the shop for the day." She informed us, before turning to head back downstairs

Honestly, I was the opposite of hungry, and this would be a good time to visit Papá Héctor and see if he was up by now. 'Maybe he can give me some tips on how to make my adventure in la Tierra de los Muertos sound less life-threatening.' I contemplated, slowly creeping back to my room as mis padres had a hushed conversation.

I made it a few steps, before I felt strong arms pick me up, setting me on mi padre's hip. I struggled for a while to get down, but the arms holding me just tightened. After a moment, I gave up trying to free myself, and settled for glaring at my captor.

"Going somewhere?" Mi padre accused with a frown. I scowled at him slightly, crossing my arms.

"I'm not a baby, Papá." I hissed at him, once again trying to get down in vain. "Stupid twig arms," I muttered under my breath.

"I know you're not. You're so mature for your age, I could never mistake you for a baby. That said—" his voice deepened into something a little more stern. "I've spent the last night *terrified* out of my mind that something might have happened to you, and now that I have you back, I'm not about to let you out of my sight." He explained to me, boosting me up a bit higher.

"And—" he continued as he narrowed his eyes—"you're beginning to have a habit of disappearing into thin air for hours on end, leaving all of us wondering where you have gone."

I lifted a single eyebrow, unimpressed by his claim. "I've been doing that for months now, and nobody noticed." I pointed out. 'Even before Día de los Muertos, I snuck out for hours to go to the plaza. Heck, I was doing it for years to learn the guitar, though maybe not quite as often back then.'

Mi padre winced at my comment, apparently still feeling guilty for the whole 'ditching me for Socorro' thing. "Yeah, that's not happening anymore. It's bad enough you apparently found your great-great-grandfather on those little outings of yours, alive and young to boot. I'd hate to think what would have happened if you'd found less...kind, people." He clenched his jaw, his arms tightening just a bit.

'He...does have a good point.' I conceded mentally. 'Doesn't mean I have to like it though.' I sighed, pouting slightly. "What did you think I would do? I don't like making shoes, and Abuela still doesn't like music all that much, even if it's the only thing that helps with Mamá Coco's memory." I pointed out, feeling like my options for

spending my free time were rather limited.

"I don't know. I should have realized that you weren't just studying in your room all those nights, quietly reading." He rolled his eyes in exasperation, and I smiled sheepishly, recalling all the days I'd sneaked out of the house without being caught so I could avoid making shoes and instead add to my guitar.

Mi papá sighed, his expression turning serious as he glanced at the clock on the hallway wall. "We'd better get downstairs and get you something to eat." He mumbled to himself, before his lips pursed slightly, and he faced me again.

"When was the last time you've eaten something?" He asked.

"Oh, I ate this morning already, so I'm not actually hungry." I assured him, resisting the urge to pat my stomach like a five-year-old.

He looked like he wanted to ask where, and how, but he just nodded his head, accepting my answer without an interrogation for once.

When we got down the stairs, he put me down, nudging me in the direction of the living room. Which I was...grateful for, actually. I didn't need Rosa or Abel to have any more ammunition than they already had. They'd both been weirdly glad to see me, but really, who knew how long that would last?

I took a deep breath as I entered the room, trying not to let myself be intimidated by all the faces staring at me expectantly.

'Where do I even begin?'

Panic

Hi, it's been a while. I hope you like this next chapter, it's one of my longer ones:) Please vote and comment, I love reading your comments soooo much!!! They're very motivating;)

Miguel's POV

'Where do I even begin?'

I gulped, and speed-walked over to the only open chair in the corner of the room. It was one of the older ones we had, and while it may have been rather beautiful at one time, was rather faded and worn out at this point. Even the springs in it kind of dug into you if you didn't sit on it just right.

I licked my lips as I picked at the small tear in the fabric of the seat. "I'm—I'm not quite sure where to start..." I trailed off, shooting a glance at my family, before quickly averting my eyes. I stared at my hands folded neatly together in my lap, focusing on the little scars I'd gotten over the years through playing outside and making shoes.

"Maybe the beginning?" Rosa suggested sarcastically. I heard a thump, followed by a muttered ouch and an apology.

I chuckled humorlessly, finding a strange comfort in the way Rosa at least was still *mostly* acting the same as she always did. "That's easier said than done." I said, my fingers clenching again. "Though...I guess it all started a long time ago, when I was around eight years old." I took a deep breath, trying to relax as I searched for the right words.

"I was at school, and I was doing my schoolwork quietly, when I heard someone outside the door singing a catchy song about goodbyes and sad guitars. I hadn't heard much music up to that point, as I was banned from music class and wasn't allowed in the plaza." I paused, adding, "I'd heard a few songs, sure, but nothing that sounded that amazing, or made me want to risk breaking the

'no-music' rule."

I shrugged, finding it hard to remember what my life was like before I'd found my calling. It was like everything pre-music was dimmer, and I just didn't know any better, isolated as I was. But once I'd really found music, once I'd played my first chord on a borrowed guitar... I was hooked.

"I'd heard a few songs, sure, but nothing that really interested me, or made me ever question disobeying the music law. Yet, when I heard that song..." I shook my head, smiling softly. "It spoke to me. I didn't know why, and I'm still not quite sure now, though I wonder if maybe..." I trailed off, realizing that maybe that wasn't the first time I'd heard the legendary song. 'Perhaps...Mamá Coco sang it to me when I was very little. It would explain why the song seemed kind of familiar, even though I didn't remember hearing it before.'

"It doesn't matter now," I blinked hard, trying to clear my thoughts. "In the few seconds I'd heard the tune, I'd fallen in love with it, and wanted to hear it again and again. I searched every day for the song, trying to figure out who had written it, and how I could listen to it whenever I wanted." I bit back a laugh, remembering all the favors I'd given out just to hear someone play it or to borrow a recording of the song.

"I found the song eventually, but in the process I'd found dozens of other wonderful songs; songs that made me really happy, and songs that were painful and sad. Ones that made me want to dance, and ones meant to be calming lullabies.

"And I realized I couldn't bring myself to give up my new love!" I looked up at Abuela cautiously, trying to gauge how angry she was. I was surprised when I found her gazing at the wall, her eyes dazed and unfocused. She didn't seem mad, more...disappointed, or resigned. A moment passed in silence, before she pursed her lips, facing me.

She must have seen the apprehension on my face, because she quickly gave me a small smile. "I'm not mad at you, Miguel; well, not for that anymore, at least. You were young, and I can't blame you for being curious. I never even told you the reason for the

music ban until you were ten, so to you, it must have seemed like a pointless rule."

I grinned at her weakly, happy she wasn't angry at me, but knowing she probably would be soon. "Anyway...I realized that the song was one of...of **Ernesto de la Cruz**'s." I practically spat out the name, and couldn't hold in a small, full-body shudder. Just the thought of him made me want to hide under my bed and never come out. "**He** was a famous musician, the one that brings all the tourists to Santa Cecilia. I started to listen to more of **his** music, and spent countless hours rummaging for old cassette tapes of movies **he** was in and finding worn down **de la Cruz** memorabilia. I hid my stuff in the attic and would listen to the tapes on the old television we threw out a few years ago." I confessed, though really, they kind of already knew about my fixation with **him**. "I—"

Whines, quickly followed by screams, blasted from the baby monitor. Mis padres glanced at each other, standing up quickly. Mi padre paused, as if catching himself, and turned to face me with conflicted emotions on his face.

"It's fine." I bared my teeth in what probably looked less like a smile, and more like a grimace. Still, it was enough for mi padre to send me a relieved look, before rushing out of the room after mi madre. I glanced down at where they'd sat a moment ago, exhaling softly.

'Guess they don't feel all that sorry after all,' I thought bitterly, wondering darkly if I left for a week next time, if it would get me a few more hours of their time. But then I reminded myself that I had other relatives to go to for help, and some eyeing me impatiently as I stared at empty seats, so I shook my head, pushing away the hurt of being the second-place child.

"I started building a replica of...of **his** white guitar." I explained, deciding to just keep talking and not waste time waiting for mis padres to return, as I wasn't even sure they would. "I practiced more and more, and I got really good by listening and watching others play. And then...Día de los Muertos happened." I flinched slightly, a chill running down my back as I purposely brought up the memories I'd been trying to bury.

"I...I ran to the plaza when—when A-Abuela broke my guitar. I tried to borrow a guitar, so I could play in the competition...but when no one would let me, I—I got desperate." I licked my lips, glancing hopefully at the entryway. But it was still empty, and my shoulders slumped when I realized neither parent was on their way back.

"I...I decided to...to borrow **Ernesto**'s guitar from the mausoleum." I gulped, my hands trembling as I waited for my family to react.

"Miguel!" I winced, folding into myself. "How could you even think that that's an okay thing to do?!"

I looked up at the sound of squeaks and loud protests, my eyes widening when I realized Abuela was heading towards me with her chancla in hand. I bolted upright, backing away from her. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, and I whimpered slightly when I hit the wall, mentally cursing myself for retreating into the corner of the room by accident.

She was getting closer to me.

'No! No, please! Please, stop!'

I tried to say something, anything to appease the furious figure in front of me, but I couldn't seem to catch my breath. My legs felt like jelly, and before I knew it, they buckled beneath me. I fell to the floor in a heap, quickly curling my arms around my head to protect myself as best as I could.

I could hear the footsteps coming near me, and I looked up in fear. I gasped when I didn't see an old woman, but **him**.

"Y-you...i-it's n-not possible! Y-you're d-dead!" I stuttered, feeling my heart stop beating at the sight before me.

"Ohh, it's cute you think it's that easy to get rid of me, Miguel." **He** chuckled darkly, grabbing my arms. **His** teeth were like that of a wolf's, **his** smile that of a predator preparing to eat its prey. "You'll *never* get rid of me."

I could feel **him** shaking me, and I struggled weakly against **his** bruising grip, my eyes squeezed tightly shut as I whimpered against

my will. 'This can't be happening! I—I d-don't want to die!'

And then, by some miracle, the hands were gone. I felt myself being picked up, and I squirmed, trying to get down; I didn't want to end up back in the sinkhole, doomed to rot for all eternity. But whoever was holding me didn't loosen their grip, and instead sat down, placing me in their lap. Arms snake around my torso, pulling me into a tight hug.

I could hear someone talking, feel a hand in my hair, but it was all too much. I didn't want to be there, didn't want to experience more pain and hurt and anger. There was—it was—

"Shhh, Miguel. It's alright, I'm—"

'I need to get away. But I need to escape the guards! How do I—'

"—in and out. *Breathe with me.*"

I tried to focus on the calming voice, hoping whoever it was could help me. They were saying something about a heartbeat, maybe, and I realized I could feel the rhythmic beat of someone's heart beneath my ear.

"*—breathe with me, Miguel, come on—*"

I tried to mimic it, but it hurt! And I was so tired of the pain, I just wanted it all to *stop—*

"You've got to relax, Mijo. I'm here, and you're okay, and you're *safe*."

The tone sounded familiar, but I was too focused on trying to breathe to put much thought into it. I forced myself to let go of the widespread tension, and to copy the steady heartbeat I could hear over the sounds of wheezing and—and whimpers?

It helped a bit, and eventually, I started to feel my breaths coming easier. I opened my eyes briefly, immediately noticing I was no longer stuck in the corner, but on the couch in the middle of the room—the one my parents were on earlier.

'But I was there, with **Ernesto**. **He** was hurting me, and I was in danger, and about to be *killed*—'

"That's it, Mijo. Relax. I've got you." I let myself go limp in the strong arms when I realized that it was all just a hallucination, that **he** was never really there. My mind was just playing horrible tricks on me, and in my panic, I'd mistaken whoever was trying to help me for **him**.

I sighed, and felt tears of pure relief falling down my cheeks at the knowledge that **he** couldn't get me. The person holding me just rubbed my back gently, murmuring soothing assurances quietly. I gripped the warm fabric from the person's shirt in my hands, a solid reminder that I was safe, that I wasn't alone. It smelled like leather and shoe shine, but also...like something else. A cologne, one I knew I'd smelled before, but couldn't remember when, or where.

I tried desperately to recall who smelled like that, who sounded so familiar. I was about to give up, and just give in to the exhaustion, when it clicked.

Slowly, I lifted my head, my eyes fluttering open.

"Papá?"

I sniffled as I rubbed the remaining tears from my face. He gave me a small smile, nodding, before pulling me close to him again. I let him as I basked in the feeling of being *held*, of being *wanted*, of being *cared for*.

'I...I've missed this *so much*.' I closed my eyes, just listening to his heart while he slowly dragged his fingers through my hair. I resisted the urge to fall asleep, not wanting to miss a second of the warm hug. I tried to push back a little, to ask him what happened, and why it was so quiet. However, his grip only tightened as he kissed the top of my head.

"Sleep, Mijo."

I stiffened, afraid of what I may see in my dreams, and even more scared of waking up alone. Papá must have noticed, because the

hand running through my hair stilled for a moment. "Sleep, Chiquito. I'll be here when you wake up." He assured me, humming a comforting tune that vibrated pleasantly through his chest.

Yawning, I let my eyes fall shut once more, giving in to my exhaustion.

Enrique's POV

I was hesitant to leave mi hijo alone with my family, considering all that had happened in my absence lately, but I convinced myself that I would only be gone for a few moments. Quickly, I followed mi amor to little Socorro's room, anxious to see what was wrong.

When I entered, I found mi hermosa already holding my little Coco, shushing her quietly and rocking her in her arms. I smiled softly at the sight, a warm feeling growing in my heart at the sight of the girls I loved most in the world.

I stood there watching for what must have been a few minutes, before I came over to mi esposa, hugging her from behind. I glanced down at my hija, who was already fast asleep. She looked so cute, with her rosy cheeks and little wisps of brown hair. She even had little curls taking shape, and I could picture all the cute ways mi amor would style it soon.

Mija had grown a lot in the past few months, and I was surprised how much she looked like Mamá Coco did when she was that age, based on old pictures. I kissed mi hija's forehead softly, before mi alma laid her back down in the crib. I don't know how long we stood there, gazing lovingly at our beautiful baby girl, before I shook myself out of the calm and peaceful reverie.

Miguel deserved to have me there, and not take the coward's way out by leaving the rest of mi familia to look over him. 'Clearly that didn't work out well last time. Who knows what may happen if I'm gone too long?' I shuddered at the thought of mi mamá attacking Miguel again, my fists clenching.

I started out the door, ready to get back to mi hijo and hear the rest of his story. I was halfway down the stairs when I heard voices

coming from the living room. *Angry* voices.

I rushed down the stairs as fast as I could, sprinting to the noise. When I barged into the living room though, I could only gape at the sight before me, stunned speechless. Mi hijo was cowering on the floor, his breathing quick and harsh, while mi mamá towered over him. Her chancla slipped from her hands as she looked back and forth between mi hijo and I, stuttered excuses falling from her lips.

I ran to my son, pushing my mother out of the way to get to him. His glazed eyes stared up at me, and I was shocked at the pure *fear* they held. He muttered something I couldn't hear, and then, his chest stopped heaving up and down.

It stopped moving *at all.*

'What do I do?! He's not—why isn't he breathing!' I gripped his arms, shaking him, trying desperately to get him to *breathe*. He struggled against me, and I realized he wasn't aware of what was going on, or who I was. I picked him up, holding on tightly so I wouldn't drop him and risk injuring his head. 'Come on, Mijo, hang in there!'

I sat down on the couch, holding him close to my chest like I did with Socorro. "Shhh, Miguel." I whispered into his ear, my whole body trembling in fear. I tried to think back to health class in school, but it was so long ago; I had *no idea* what was going on.

I wasn't sure what I was even saying, and just muttered whatever came to mind as I ran my fingers through his hair. It was all I could do not to shake him again, to try to physically move his lungs. I knew that wouldn't work, but the words weren't helping, and a doctor wouldn't come in time, and *I didn't know what to do—*

'That—that was a breath! He's breathing, he's breathing, okay Mijo, let me help—'

"You've got to relax, Mijo. I'm here. It's alright. You're safe." Mijo coughed slightly, his whimper one of utter misery. My heart simultaneously ached for him and cheered at the idea that he *was breathing again*.

I could feel the tension in my son's body slowly melting away as the rise and fall of his chest became steadier. I could feel his fingers curl around my shirt, the tension one I gladly welcomed.

"That's it, Mijo. Relax. I've got you." I murmured to him in the gentlest voice I had. I internally panicked when his body went completely limp, till I realized he was probably fine, and just exhausted after his fit.

A few moments passed as Miguel's breathing gradually returned to normal. I continued to mutter words of assurance to him, slowly rubbing circles on his back. I could feel wetness on my shirt, and I prayed the tears were out of relief rather than any lingering pain. I didn't know exactly what had caused this fit, and I had no clue how it would feel to start breathing after going minutes without doing so.

It felt like years went by before Miguel lifted his head minutely, just enough to see my face, as he opened his eyes.

"Papá?"

The word was scratchy and hesitant, and it broke my heart to know Miguel hadn't recognized my voice at first, that he was only now realizing who I was. I smiled down at him and nodded, trying not to frown when I saw the scar on his cheek. I pulled him close to me, needing the physical warmth of his body to know he was *safe*, he was *here*, he was going to be *alright*.

I dragged my hands through his hair, remembering the days when he'd crash his bike, or fall a little too hard while playing fútbol. He'd come running inside, balling, and I'd pull him close, running my hands through his shaggy raven mop to soothe him.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd comforted him like this, the last time I'd hugged him for more than a second or two before one or both of us ran out the door. It had been years since Miguel had run inside after a rough game of fútbol, and even longer since he'd crashed his bike. I wasn't even sure he *had* a bike anymore, if it hadn't been given to Manny or Benny by now.

A couple minutes passed before I felt mi chiquito try to pull away from me. I was slightly hurt that he wanted to get away from me so soon after realizing who I was, but I didn't let it deter me from holding Miguel closer to my chest.

"Sleep, Mijo." I commanded softly, knowing he was probably beyond exhausted by this point. I felt him stiffen in my arms, as if afraid. Frowning, I stopped my gentle ministrations for a moment.

"Sleep, chiquito." I said, struggling to be firm and still gentle with my tone. "I'll be here when you wake up." I reassured him, humming an old song that Mamá Coco secretly taught me when I was little. Mi hijo seemed to relax even further at the music, his breathing almost instantly deepening as he finally fell asleep.

My shoulders drooped in relief as I leaned my head back, content that Mijo was at last getting some much needed rest. 'Who knows if he's even slept in the past forty-eight hours? For all I know, he could have been awake and running around with Héctor last night.' I sighed, running my hands softly through Miguel's hair, trying to avoid where I thought the bumps and cuts were.

With mi hijo sleeping peacefully, though I knew it probably wouldn't last for long, I took the moment to evaluate my surroundings. I was slightly surprised when I noticed that I was the only one in the room now, because I didn't recall ever seeing the rest of mi familia leave. Then again, it was suspiciously quiet while I was trying to calm mi hijo down.

Carefully, I stood up, freezing when I felt Miguel shift in my arms. I waited for a moment, but when he didn't wake, I slowly made my way up the stairs to the bedrooms, making sure to place my feet on the steps that didn't creak. We'd just reached the top, when I heard the baby start to fuss in the nursery.

I hesitated. 'I should really try to get her to settle down—'

Miguel shifted in my arms, interrupting my train of thought. Mijo's face was scrunched up, and I realized he was waking because of the crying. 'I could try to calm her...or I could stay with Miguel.'

I bit my lip, weighing my options. 'Socorro really should be checked on...but I don't want to leave Miguel alone. What if he wakes up, and he panics again, and I'm not there to help him?' My eyes widened at the thought as I reflexively tightened my hold on my son.

'What if he leaves again, this time for good?'

"No," I muttered to myself, physically turning my body away from the nursery. "I'd best stay with Miguel."

I heard a moan, and glanced at my son, before quickly walking into mi esposa's and my room. I closed the door behind us with my foot, tiptoeing across the wooden floorboards beneath me to the king-sized bed.

I laid down on the comfy mattress, adjusting Miguel so he was on top of me. 'Was he always this light...' I pondered, concerned at the fact that I could feel his ribs through his shirt. 'Is he not eating enough?'

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had dinner with Miguel. Most of the time, I ate early in the mornings and late at night, when Miguel was in bed. 'How did I miss this?' I despaired, biting my lip. 'This didn't happen overnight. How long has mi hijo been eating less, and how long has he been having those...those incidents?' I scoured my mind for some sort of clue, some indication of when this may have all started.

'Miguel has always been skinny. But when did he stop looking scrawny, and start looking—' I shuddered slightly—'starved?'

I tried to recall the last time I'd actually seen him eat, whether a snack in the workshop, or a pan dulce from the markets he bought with his shoe-shining money. 'It's been months...ever since—' I tensed at the realization that I hadn't seen mi hijo eat since Socorro was born. 'That was over three months ago!' I bit back a groan, mentally scolding myself for being so stupid.

'How could I leave him alone like that, practically parentless? We didn't even talk to him most days!' I winced, wondering if that was

partly how he got so good at playing the guitar.

'I mean, even after Día de los Muertos...what did we do?' My brows furrowed as I thought over the aftermath of that night. 'We should have taken him to the hospital, and figured out where he went to and what happened. Instead, I grounded him, and just sent him to bed.' I squeezed my eyes shut tight, resisting the urge to slap myself and risk waking Miguel.

'He even came to us a few nights ago, and I sent him away!' I recalled, tears wetting my cheeks. ' He was scared, he just wanted to spend the night with us, and what do I do? I kick him out, like some dirty callejero unfit to stay in our bed. I'm—I'm a *horrible father*.' My fingers clenched subconsciously in my self-hatred. Hearing a slight whimper, I quickly pulled them away from Miguel's arm, wondering darkly when I'd stop accidentally hurting my kid.

He shifted, and I could tell from his breathing that he was not asleep anymore, but not quite awake either, on the edge of consciousness. He rubbed his face against my chest, and I held completely still, praying that Miguel wouldn't wake up quite yet.

'He needs his sleep.' I grimaced, recalling the dark bags he had under his eyes. 'He probably has nightmares. Why else would he try to sneak into our bed? He's never been scared of storms, so unless there's something I'm not factoring in...' I pondered for a moment whether I was missing something, before sighing softly and adding nightmares to the growing list of things I'd missed in my negligence.

'He was such a happy boy just a year ago! Surely there's something else at work here; this can't all be mi esposa's and my fault...can it?'

I tried to recall all the accounts I'd heard about cases like this, of children who had nightmares, and looked starved, even though they were well-off.

My eyes widened. I could only think of one story at the moment, and it was easily the saddest one known to all the adults of Santa Cecilia.

It was the death of Marco Torrez.

Marco had been a normal boy through elementary school. He'd liked to play outside, and make messes, and get into all kinds of mischief, just like every other little kid. But when he was thirteen, his family's bakery had caught fire from a freak flour accident. The flames engulfed the building in seconds, and by the time people had gotten help, the damage was done: Marco's parents and baby brother were nothing but burnt corpses.

He was never the same. Of course, for a while, he seemed as okay as he could be. He lived at the orphanage, and went to school like usual. However, he seemed...off. He never ate with the rest of the kids in the cafeteria, and he didn't talk all that much anymore. That, with the school bullies...

I blinked sharply, trying to avoid even more tears. Because Marco was small for his age, and had no one to defend him...the bullies were brutal, both physically and mentally. Some of the things they said still haunted me, and gave me nightmares of my own as a kid.

'I'll always regret not trying to help him.' I thought, my chest aching as it did every time I thought of Marco. 'If I'd just stuck up for him, offered him some sort of comfort...'

It all went on for *years*. Eventually, he stopped talking at all. He became a shadow, unnoticed and uncared for. So four years later, on the anniversary of his family's death, when the orphanage found him dead in his bed...it was awful, but no one was shocked to hear it was poison.

We all knew it wasn't murder.

'If Miguel had continued the way he had been, and I'd never noticed that anything was wrong—never seen the bullies, or our negligence...would he have...'

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. '*No*, that can't—that *won't happen to him*. I'm not going to contemplate any 'what ifs', because I'll *be there for him*—I'll be a better father, the one that he needs. I'll—I'll hold him up, even when everyone else is trying to push him down.' I vowed to myself, refusing to accept anything less.

Miguel began to stir. I was struck by the thought that I hadn't seen him do this since he was little, when he used to take naps on me after playing outside for hours on end. It was a sight I needed to relearn, another thing I had lost and needed to reclaim. And as mi hijo slowly left the land of dreams I made a silent vow to him as well:

'Never again will I forget you, Mijo.'

A Change for the Better

It's been almost a year and a half. I should have updated this a lot sooner, and for that, I do apologize. The past month has been kind of crazy with the quarantine and everything, but I hope if you're reading this, you're staying safe and healthy:) Till next time, amigos!

Miguel's POV

'Where am I?' I rubbed my head against the sheet beneath me, not quite fully awake yet. It was sort of scratchy, and warm too, like it had just been dried in the sun. It was much warmer than the blankets in my bed, anyways.

'So not my bed, then. But where—'

I couldn't help the full-body flinch I had as everything came back to me at the speed of a bullet: sharing my secrets, angry Abuela, the panic at seeing **him**, and mi...mi padre, being there.

'That still doesn't explain where I am though...' I thought, worried about moving too much just in case I wasn't somewhere safe. But then the sheet beneath me *moved*, and I tried to sit up, only to find myself trapped by a weight across my back. I struggled again, harder this time, resulting in a grunt.

"Miguel? Are you awake?" I heard and *felt* someone say.

"Who...?" I trailed off, realizing I recognized the voice. "What happened, Papá?" I lifted my head, pushing his arm away.

"You fell asleep, and I took you to my and Mamá's room." He explained while I sat up, his hands gripping onto my shoulders lightly while I found my bearings.

"Do you remember what happened, before..." He trailed off with narrowed eyes, as if afraid the very mention of my...episode, would

cause me to have another one.

"Mostly. There's nothing I need filling in on." I grimaced slightly at the thought of how weak I was. 'How could I have ever thought that **he** was here. It's impossible.' I scolded myself.

'Yet, it felt so real! Like **he** was actually in the room with me!' I bit my lip, remembering how scared it made me feel. But then I noticed mi padre was trying to talk to me, and decided to contemplate how to deal with all that later.

"Are you alright? Is your breathing okay? Do you want something to eat? Drink?" Mi padre shot off question after question like it was physically impossible to ask only one.

"I'm *fine*." I stressed, giving mi padre a look. 'What on earth is up with him? He's acting like I've been in the hospital or something.' I slowly drifted away from mi padre, creeped out at the way he was staring at me. 'Who knows. Adults are weird.'

I tried to get off the bed, but mi padre grabbed me, dragging me close to him.

"¡Papá!" I shouted, jerking my legs in the air while my arms pinwheeled.

His hands settled around my biceps, his hold just loose enough to avoid bruises. "Shhh! Socorro is sleeping down the hall!"

I froze, my teeth grinding as I thought, 'it's always about Socorro though, isn't it?' My jaw began to hurt. 'Whatever. I don't need to stay here anyways. I can always go back to la Tierra de los Muertos, back to people who *really* care.'

I tugged my arms out of mi padre's hands, jumping off the bed in a move I'd learned online after Día de los Muertos. For a second, mi padre just gaped as I straightened my shirt and jacket, and I relished in his surprise. But then he leaped to his feet as well, his finger in the air and mouth open—

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna go to my room. Maybe I can do some homework, or read a book." I opened the door, refusing to turn

away as mi padre's expression darkened. "But don't worry—it won't be anything too *loud!"* I stormed out the door, not bothering to close it behind me. 'I can't believe he was scolding me, when he was the one who surprised me in the first place! And it's not like you can even hear Socorro from mis padres' room, otherwise they wouldn't have the baby monitor.'

I rolled my eyes, automatically side-stepping a creaky board. 'I bet I could play the guitar as loud as I wanted, and no one would even hear! It's not like—'

There were arms around my torso, yanking me clear off the ground. "Hey!" I shouted, struggling in the steel-like grip. "Let me go!" I kicked my legs against the person's shins, twisting and turning as hard as I could.

"Miguel, stop!" Mi padre's voice was strained, but still recognizable.

I relaxed slightly, reassured that it was only mi padre holding me, before redoubling my efforts. I was annoyed with myself at how quick I was to jump to completely irrational conclusions. How could any intruders possibly get past a dozen people anyways? And why would they come for me here?

After struggling for a few more seconds, I huffed, choosing to ignore my pessimistic thoughts for the moment. "Can you please put me down?" I bit out as nicely as I could. 'Figures, now he starts paying attention. I could have used his help more *before* I found out I didn't have to stay in the Land of the Living. I—'

My internal complaining screeched to a halt at the ear-piercing noise that was Socorro's wailing. I grinned, silently thanking my baby sister for having perfect timing.

Morphing my expression into an upbeat half-smile, I tilted my head back to face mi padre. "You should probably go check on her. You know, in case something is wrong." I suggested in a forced light tone, while I was really thinking, 'You should leave, so I can go visit Papá Héctor and play music with him.'

I waited impatiently for mi padre to set me down so I could race to

my room, but his hold on me didn't loosen even a bit. "No." He said, his voice quiet, but firm. His chestnut eyes bore into me, as if he wasn't looking at me, but *into* me. I pulled back slightly, disliking the exposed feeling that his gaze gave me. I couldn't help but mentally compare his eyes to an—an x-ray machine or something, like he could read my mind!

"*No*?" I stared at him, my neck starting to hurt from the weird angle. "What do you mean *no*? There is no such thing as a "no"!"

I was sure I looked like an idiot, but at the moment, it was the farthest thing from my mind. '"No"? What does "no" mean? He always checks on Socorro when she's crying!' I scoured my memories for even one time when Socorro was wailing, and mi padre didn't go running to her crib-side, like a prince in shining armor.

Socorro's cries became shrill, yet still mi padre's eyes never strayed from my own. Even when the noise started to be painful, and I began to question why no one was coming, he didn't move a *centimeter*. It was like the noise was...irrelevant, or something.

Instead, mi padre continued to stare at me like I was a particularly stubborn shoe he was working on, one he couldn't seem to get quite right. It was a look I'd seen him wear only a few times, when he was so focused on his work that madre had to physically drag him away. I couldn't remember a time when he'd ever looked at *me* like that before, though; like nothing else mattered right then except for me. If I was being honest, it terrified me as much as it made me feel special, because I'd only gotten looks even *half* this intense when mi padre suspected I was hiding something, or lying.

Despite my misgivings, I relaxed slightly as I stared back into his eyes, realizing that he didn't seem angry or annoyed. Instead, he seemed almost...concerned. I blinked rapidly, jerking back with what little room I had. 'Why is he concerned? I've only got some minor injuries. If anything, it's Coco he should be worried about, not me; she usually doesn't cry this long...'

"—you, Miguel."

I shook my head slightly, confused.

"What?" I asked, my voice shakier than I meant for it to be. I should have been paying more attention, but the noise was definitely hurting my head now.

"Socorro is going to be fine," mi padre rolled his eyes, giving me a wry grin. "There are over a dozen people in this house. I'm sure someone else can check on her for a change."

I gaped at him, wondering yet again if my ears were working right. "But you and Mamá always check on her! She cries, and you drop everything to get to her!"

I couldn't move my hands around like I wanted, but if I could, they would be waving like flags in the wind.

Mi padre sighed, hard wrinkles forming on his forehead. "Yes, we usually do." He frowned, a sight I was unfortunately very familiar with at this point. "But it has come to my attention recently that we've spent a large amount of time in the past few months with our second child. I think a few hours with our first child is long overdue, hmmm?" His lips quirked up, as if he was letting me in on a joke.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out the catch. I didn't want to get roped in, to let my hope control my actions for the worse. "Just...just us? No Socorro?" I asked carefully. Contrary to what my cousins liked to believe, I wasn't completely stupid. I knew that if he suggested Socorro come with us, he didn't really want to spend time with me.

In fact, I could recall several instances where mis padres would drop Socorro into my arms, saying it'd be good for all of us to spend time together. Then they'd sit down on either side of me, completely ignoring anything I said or did as they cooed over Coco as she babbled. That is, until a 'situation' would come up, and I'd be stuck with a crying infant for hours while my parents dealt with the issue.

'I love Socorro, but I do not love her vocal cords.' I inwardly

shuddered, reminding myself for the hundredth time that those chords could make her a great singer one day.

"Just us." He assured me emphatically, bringing me out of my thoughts. "We can get my sister to watch Socorro for the day."

I made a face. "But Tía Gloria *hates* watching Socorro." I said. "Every time you ask her to, she says, 'I want to be able to hear when I'm 60, so no thank you!'"

"Then I'll have my brother watch her. Either way, I'm not letting you out of my sight for a *long* time." He gave me a look, the one he always had while dishing out punishments or chores. "And besides, clearly I don't need to check on the baby each time she cries."

I raised my brow. "What gave you that idea?"

"Listen."

I wondered briefly if mi padre was going crazy, but exhaled loudly, doing what he said. I allowed myself to take in the faint clank of pots being used downstairs, the soft murmuring coming from the first floor, and the dim racket of someone making shoes in the workshop. If I concentrated, I could just barely hear the sound of the vendors outside selling their goods. I smiled slightly, realizing it was a lot more peaceful than usual for this time of day. Taking a deep breath in and out, I looked up at my father.

"No more crying," he pointed out with a grin.

"Whatever." I grumbled, mentally cursing my bad over my lost escape opportunity. "You do realize that you can't watch me every hour of the day, right? That's, like, impossible."

"And why not?" He asked, shifting his arms so my legs were supported. "I can take you to the workshop with me. I'm sure with how busy we always are, an extra set of hands would go a looooong way."

"I—I have school!" I spluttered, my stomach clenching against my will. "And—and you know I don't like the workshop!" I accused, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. 'Is this his way of saying I

need to be a shoemaker full-time now? I don't even get to finish school? I—I thought I had at least a few more years though!'

Mi padre paused, seeming to really think about what I'd said. "You'll go back to school eventually, of course. I just think that with everything that's happened lately, a break from school might be...good, for you." He spoke slowly, and I could tell he was choosing his words carefully. "And, even though you don't like making shoes, it is the family business. Riveras are *shoemakers*, and it's time you at least learn the basics."

His voice practically oozed finality, and I realized it would be hopeless to try to fight him outright on this. I racked my brain quickly for some sort of excuse to give to get out of workshop duty.

"I could watch Coco for you while you and Mamá work!" I exclaimed, leaning forward. "That way you can get a break from the baby and I don't have to—I mean—that way you can spend some quality time with Mamá." I grinned nervously, hoping he didn't catch my slip up.

"Oh no," mi papá chuckled. "You're not getting out of the workshop that easily."

I groaned, fighting the urge to start crying again. My head was aching at just the thought of all the chaotic noise in the crowded work area. I tried to rub away the pain, but winced when I ended up pushing against the gash from Jake.

Mi padre grabbed my hand, moving it to my side as he eyed the wound. "If I put you down, do you promise not to run away?" He raised his brow, staring at me with thinly veiled distrust, like he wouldn't believe me no matter what I said. 'Although really, I have kind of lied in the past to sneak cookies. And to go play fútbol. And to listen to music...' I blinked, wondering briefly why I wasn't better at lying yet with how often I seemed to do it.

I contemplated my options, which were rather slim. 'I could try to make a run for it...' I realized, glancing around the hallway. 'Who am I kidding.' I frowned. 'His legs are twice as long as mine. I'd never make it to my room, and even if I tried to go to la Tierra de

los Muertos, I might accidentally take him with me. Or worse, he could only half come...' I mentally shuddered, deciding not to go any further down *that* particular train of thought.

"*Fine,*" I agreed, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. Mi padre searched my face for a solid minute, probably looking for signs of mischief or something, before finally setting me down on my feet.

Immediately, mi padre knelt before me, his hands poking gently at my head injury. I flinched away as he pressed against a particularly sore area, humming slightly at his muttered apology. After what felt like forever, his hands moved away, and I thought the impromptu inspection was done. That is, until he moved on to the cut on my face. I forced back a groan, trying to make myself stand as still as possible while he carefully inspected my cheek.

He paused for a moment, his thumb barely grazing the raised scab. His eyes were a bit misty, and he cringed at something, though I wasn't sure what. Maybe some dirt? It had been a while since I'd had a real shower, and la Tierra de los Muertos wasn't exactly *clean.*

"My mother should *never* have punished you for not eating." Mi padre finally said. "I'm...I am sorry, that I wasn't there to stop her the first time, and was too shocked to prevent her second...attack. She should have realized that violence was not the answer," Mi padre pursed his lips, and even in the dim lighting I could see the way his eyes seemed unusually red.

I did nothing but stare blankly up at him, still astounded at the fact that he was taking *my side.* 'Never have I seen him take *anyone's* side over Abuela's. I just don't...I don't *understand.* Why does Papá disagree with her on the punishment, but not on the music ban? Is it because he got the chancla as a kid? Or something even *worse*?'

"—alright? Miguel, *please*." He hissed, shaking my shoulders. I shuddered slightly, blinking rapidly as I pulled myself out of my head.

"Sorry, I just...got lost in thought," I mumbled. "What were you saying?"

Mi papá's eyebrows scrunched down, a slight frown appearing on his face. "It's nothing." He assured me. I didn't quite believe him, but before I could try to figure out what I missed, he continued talking.

"Now," he began, clearing his throat. "I know that this cut—" he gently touched the gash left by Jake—"was caused by bullies. Are there any other injuries that I should be aware of?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, keeping my face as neutral as possible. "Not really...just a few little bruises and scrapes. Nothing that's a big deal," I said evenly, hoping *he* wouldn't make a big deal about it if *I* was calm.

Instead, my words had the opposite effect somehow. Mi padre's eyes darkened as he pursed his lips, his voice a growl as he said, "show me these "little" bruises and scrapes."

"I'm fine, Papá! You need to stop worrying so much," I protested with a huff. 'Why now, of all times, does he choose to take an interest in my problems; right when I'd rather he just let me deal with this on my *own*!'

"*Miguel*. That was not a request." Mi padre snapped. I fought back an involuntary flinch, knowing that even though his voice sounded similar to **his**, they were entirely different people.

I must not have hid my reaction as well as I meant to, because mi padre grimaced. He heaved a long sigh, before suddenly dragging me into another hug. I hesitated, not quite sure how to react to the unprovoked embrace. At this point, I was beginning to think hugs were now mi padre's go to answer for when he faced situations he didn't like, and they were more so to make *him* feel better than *me*.

Still, I awkwardly put my arms around mi padre's stomach, leaning my head on his shoulder. Breathing in, I let the familiar smell of leather ground me, reminded of days long gone where I would sit on mi papá's lap as he worked. I exhaled quietly, focusing on the soft fabric under my face, instead of the stinging sensation in my eyes.

"Listen, Miguel." Mi padre pulled away from me, placing his palm

on my uninjured cheek. "I love you. I *care* that you're being hurt like this. To see you *bloody* and *bruised*, and knowing that I wasn't there to prevent you from getting hurt...that *kills* me." The unshed tears in mi papá's eyes spoke even louder than his distraught voice. I'd never seen his eyes even damp before today, and now it had happened *twice*, because of *me*.

"I...I wasn't there. And, *I should have been*. I would give *anything* to be able to go back and fix all this, to stop you from ever getting injured in the first place." He choked out, rubbing the tears on my cheek away with his thumb.

'When did I start crying?'

"But I *can't*." He squeezed his eyes shut hard, before opening them again. "The best I can do is try to make it up to you. And I know that you might find that hard to believe. I *know* that tu mamá and I haven't been there for you like we should have been. All I'm asking is for you to let me back in, to give us another chance. Will you...can you do that?" He grabbed my hands in his own clammy one, his other still flush against my cheek.

I stared at him, my thoughts erratic. 'I want to. But what if...what if it goes back to how it was? What if they decide that I'm not as good as Socorro? What if...what if they decide I'm not worth it?' I couldn't help but think of the worst, of how awful it would feel if mis padres started ignoring me again.

'That—that could happen. But, if it does...I could always go back to Mamá Imelda and Papá Héctor. They'll always be there for me, even if I mess up. So there's not really any harm in hoping...is there?' I argued back against the part of me that didn't want to get hurt.

"Okay." I smiled weakly, responding quickly so I couldn't second guess my decision again. "I think I can do that."

Mi papá grinned brightly down at me, pulling me into a bone-crushing hug as he stood up. I groaned slightly, mi papá's arms much stronger than Papá Héctor's, and pressing way too hard on my only slightly healed bruises.

Instantly, mi papá placed me on the ground, lifting up my T-shirt. "¡Dios mío! Voy a matar a los..." he continued swearing, spewing out more curse words than I'd ever heard at one time in my life.

I wasn't sure what I was more surprised at: the fact that he knew all those vulgar words, or that he was now trying to completely remove my shirt in the middle of the hall, probably to see where all the bruises were. I tried swatting his hands away, but that seemed to only make his grip stronger.

"¡Papá! You can't just take off my shirt in the upstairs hallway!" I hissed, blushing when I noticed Tía Gloria taking one glance at us, before slowly heading back down the stairs.

Mi papá rolled his eyes with a huff. "Fine. We can do this somewhere else if you feel so *shy*." He teased. "Never mind the fact that you regularly take off your shirt to play fútbol, go swimming —"

"It's not the same!" I interjected, my face heating up as I frowned at him. I couldn't help exhaling in relief when he finally let go of my T-shirt, allowing me to tug it back down until it almost reached my knees.

I was about to lead the way to my room, when I noticed mi papá was going in the opposite direction. I stared at him in confusion, and was about to assume he'd just given up, until he turned around, looking at me expectantly.

"Well, do you want to do this in a private room or not?" He asked.

My eyebrows scrunched together as I crossed my arms. "Why can't we just do this in my room? No one will come in, and it's the farthest one down, so when you, I don't know, poke and prod—" I grimaced in distaste—"or scold me, no one will hear."

Mi papá gazed down at me in confusion. "Why would I—hold up." He sighed heavily, rubbing away the stress lines on his forehead. "How do you know that no one will hear noise in your room?" He questioned, his voice full of suspicion.

"About that..." I bit my lip, contemplating how much to share. "I may or may not practice guitar at night when I can't sleep. But only sometimes!" I assured mi padre when I noticed him becoming irritated.

"*Miguel*. You need your sleep!" He scolded, wagging his finger at me.

"I know!" I snapped, not appreciating him telling me something I'd heard a thousand times as a kid. "I know I should sleep more! It's just I get nightmares, and I can't get back to sleep, and I spend the whole night flinching at every creak, and I—" my voice cracked. I felt the tension practically flow out of me as I gave a long, ragged sigh. I stared at the floor, rubbing my upper arm anxiously.

"Playing music...it helps. It doesn't make the—the nightmares go away, but...it helps." I confessed, fighting the urge to cry. 'Gosh, I'm such a *baby*. I can't seem to stop crying, not even for an hour! Now I see what—'

I felt a hand in my hair, ruffling it gently. Huffing, I pushed the offensive extremity away, glancing up. Mi papá chuckled at my glare, placing his hand on my shoulder instead.

"If that's what it takes to help you calm down, then that's fine. But next time you have a nightmare, I want you to come to your mom and I first, alright?"

I must have looked confused, because his grin fell slightly. "I know what I said a few nights ago, but I was wrong. There was clearly something bothering you more than a little storm, and I'm sorry it took me so long to realize that. I promise, no matter how late it is, or if you wake us up, you can stay in our bed. Ok?"

He looked me in the eyes with the same intensity as earlier. Slowly, I nodded, giving him a quick smile. I wasn't sure if I believed him completely, but I also knew that nothing he could say right now would convince me entirely. If he sensed my hesitance, though, he didn't say anything, just patted my back before setting his arm around my shoulders. He led me down the hallway, back the way we came.

Confused, I allowed him to until I realized where we were going. I stopped abruptly, facing him. "I'm not all that tired, Papá. And, if I were, I could just sleep in my bed, not yours. I don't *always* have nightmares." I crossed my arms, a nasty habit that was a dead-giveaway for when I was feeling defensive.

"I figured as much. However, I still want to see the extent of your bruising, and I'd like to do that in tu mamá's and my room." He gestured for me to keep walking, and I reluctantly followed him.

"Why again can't we just do this in my room?" I finally asked.

"Because—" mi papá shut the door behind us with a slight click. "There's a phone in here. And the second I think your injuries are more severe than a couple "little bruises and scrapes", I will be making some calls. First to the doctor, and then, the school." His eyes darkened.

I gulped.

A Bright Future

Happy New Year everyone! I hope you all are safe and healthy! Thank you so much for all of your comments (especially the one about leaving the zoom meeting lol). I hope you guys enjoy this next chapter! And may your 2021's be a lot brighter 2020 has been.

Miguel's POV

My eyes widened, but I relaxed quickly once I realized something mi papá had apparently forgotten. "It's Sunday evening. Who would be at the school? And, do you have the nearest hospital's number memorized, or...?" I trailed off, my eyes narrowing slightly at the prospect of mi papá knowing both of those numbers off the top of his head. 'That would be weird, right?'

He frowned. "I may not be able to get ahold of the school, but if those bruises look too concerning, I won't hesitate to call your Uncle Luis." He warned, crossing his arms.

I scowled as I jumped onto his and Mamá's bed. I tended to forget about my Mom's side of the family sometimes, mostly because we only saw them once every few years, as they lived in the United States. Not to mention that I'd *completely* forgotten about the fact that Uncle Luis was in some fancy medical school in Florida to become a something-trician. I wracked my brain for a moment, trying to remember what the word was for doctors that took care of kids. I quickly abandoned this task, however, when I noticed mi papá was talking.

"—your shirt."

I blinked. My expression must have shown my confusion, because he sighed heavily, dragging a hand down his face. I bit my lip, hoping I hadn't zoned out for too long.

"In order to look at the bruises, I need you to take off your shirt."

He repeated with a small, exasperated grin.

I exhaled slightly, relieved somewhat that mi padre wasn't actually angry at me. Grimacing, I slipped out of my jacket, and tugged my T-shirt off, trying to avoid brushing the material against the still tender head wounds. It took a few seconds longer than it normally would have, and by the time I was finally dropping the dirty article on the ground, I couldn't help but wish I'd put a looser shirt on yesterday.

My father breathed in sharply. His face paled rapidly, and his mouth spewed forth a litany of swears that made me somewhat question whether my father had completely obeyed the 'no music' rule in his youth as well. 'I've only ever heard language that bad at the plaza, and even then, never except for on rare occasions or very late at night. Or after very close fútbol games, I guess.' I smirked slightly, just imagining the aghast expression on Mamá Imelda's face if she were to hear mi papá now. 'She would be chasing him around the room with her chancla probably, while Papá Héctor tried to calm her down. Or maybe—'

"Hospital. *Now*." Mi padre demanded through clenched teeth, steam practically blasting out of his ears. I gaped at him as he reached out to pick me up from under my arms, again, only just managing to awkwardly shuffle further onto the bed and avoid his reach.

"What?! No! I don't want to go to the hospital!" I exclaimed, trying to find enough purchase on the slippery sheets to push myself far, far away from the, quite frankly, alarmingly physical display of concern.

'What on earth is going on? He's acting loco! He's never even mentioned getting any sort of medical help before for any of my bruises, and now all of a sudden he wants to drag me off to the hospital?'

I narrowed my eyes, finding this sudden change highly suspicious. "What the heck is going on?! I've had bruises like this since I was, like, *nine*." I avoided mi padre's arm as he tried to reach for me from across the wide mattress. "Why is it now, all of a sudden, that you want to drag me off to the hospital for them?" I asked, not even

bothering to mask my irritation at mi padre trying to haul me away like a sack of potatoes.

Mi padre scowled. " I know it's been a long day, but you don't take that tone with me young—"

His face, previously burning with rage, turned ashen. It was like all of the color had been washed away in seconds, leaving a ghost-like version of himself behind.

'Is it healthy for your face to turn white, then red, then white again like that in under five minutes?' A small part of me questioned as mi padre practically dropped onto the bed, like he was a puppet whose strings were chopped. I stared at him, unsure why he suddenly looked so....lost? Is that what it was? I glanced at the door, and then back to my father, contemplating my options. 'I could leave right now, while he's...processing, I guess.'

Slowly, I slid off the bed, walking quickly across the room. I reached out for the door's handle, curling my hand around the metal—

"Three *years*?"

"What?" I turned, barely hearing the whispered words. Mi padre swallowed, facing me. His eyes glanced from my face to my chest, as I realized abruptly that I'd forgotten my shirt. He seemed to almost visibly deflate at the sight of the bruises, making a strange noise that sounded like a mixture between a growl and a moan.

"You've been—" he croaked, swallowing, as if the words leaving his mouth were literally choking him. "You've been *physically bullied* for the last *three years*?"

I pursued my lips, unsure how to answer after seeing such a raw display of emotion from my usually strong, reserved father. My eyes shifted to the doorknob in my hand, and in my mind's eye I saw how easy it would be to race out the door, and escape to the plaza or la Tierra de los Muertos.

'But is that really what you want?' A small voice whispered in the

back of my head. I inwardly groaned, trying to ignore that childish part of me that wanted to spill all of my secrets to mi papá, the part that practically chanted 'Papá will make everything okay. Just tell him, and all your problems will be solved!' But he doesn't do that. It hasn't been that way in years.' I thought bitterly, fighting the urge to scoff at the foolish notion that telling all of my woes to my father would magically make them disappear.

'On the other hand...he seems to be trying. I mean, he even stayed with me when Coco started bawling.' I considered, taking in the way mi papá was still patiently waiting for me to say something. 'I know that talking to him won't suddenly fix my problems. But, maybe—maybe he'll actually help me.' I bit my lip, rubbing the back of my neck as I let my hand fall away from the doorknob. I shivered, wishing I hadn't left my clothes on the bed, right next to mi papá.

Abruptly, mi padre practically leapt to his feet. I flinched, making to reach for the brass knob again, before realizing mi papá was all but sprinting to the wardrobe in the corner of the room. He flung open the doors, hands slinging clothes onto the floor like he was on a race against time to dump everything out. I watched, mesmerized, as almost a dozen pairs of pants, and at least twenty shirts, were discarded in his fervor to find...something.

'Honestly, that crazy thing is starting to sound more and more believable.' I thought, resisting the urge to laugh as he digged; it would probably come out a little too hysterical at this point, and I was *trying* to sound as sane as possible.

As quickly as it started, mi padre's frantic searching stopped as he grasped something at the very back of the large wooden cabinet. I couldn't see what exactly he'd grabbed, but it looked a lot bulkier than anything he usually wore. Still, mi padre pivoted on his heel, facing me with a grin.

My eyebrows shot up faster than a rocket once I realized he was holding the old, wool sweater he saved for special occasions, such as Christmas or weddings. It was easily the softest and warmest thing mi padre owned, a beautiful blend of soft blues and warm greens that made it simultaneously an article of clothing and a

beautiful piece of art. It probably was handmade, if I had to guess, though I'd never examined it closely enough to tell. I'd been warned ever since I was un niño pequeño not to go anywhere *near* it. I knew that it was worth at *least* three months' savings, and that if anything happened to it within a two room radius of me, I would be so severely punished even the wild animals stuck in the capital's bullfighting arenas would pity me.

"What is that out for? Who's getting married?" I asked, already backing away from the prized possession. I knew how accident prone I could be, and that I probably wasn't the cleanest after landing on the kitchen table yesterday, and reading on the floor of the grimy corner of the library.

"It's for you. I want you to wear something warm and comfortable, and this will rub the least on your—injuries." His expression darkened as he practically spat the last word, like it left a bad taste in his mouth. I almost thought he was angry at me for being injured, before realizing that probably wasn't the case, if the way he wanted me to wear something so special was any indication.

"But—but that's the *special* sweater. The 'get it stained, and you better wish for *banishment*' sweater!'" I explained, waving my arms wildly in an attempt to make him see how weird he was acting. "I'm all...bloody, and stuff. And you know how clumsy I am! Do I need to tell you about how I literally walked into a pool, while singing in front of hundreds of people?"

Mi padre's eyebrow raised slightly, and he chuckled. "Yes, I actually do want to hear that story, eventually. But first—" he held out the expensive garment—"please, put this on."

I continued to refuse, but he merely shook his head, saying, "I know you're not the...cleanest, at the moment. I don't care though. I want you to be as cozy as possible."

"But Abuela—" I cut myself off, shaking my hands up and down as I grimaced. "She will *kill* me! As nice as la Tierra de los Muertos is, I don't—"

In the blink of an eye, mi papá crossed the few feet of distance

between us, carefully sliding the garment over my head. I struggled feebly, unwilling to give in without a fight, but also trying not to tear the sweater. However, mi papá just ignored both my physical and verbal disagreement, manually pulling my arms through the sleeves with firm, gentle motions.

The sweater was so large on my narrow shoulders that it almost slid to the floor. I was about to comment on how it looked more like a dress than a shirt, when he rolled up the bottom edge until it no longer reached my knees. I could do nothing but stare as he did the same with the sleeves, rolling them over so that my hands could actually be seen. 'What are the odds that mi padre has been replaced with an alien? A really obvious, poorly educated, alien?' I gaped at the man before me, suddenly wondering just how real the facial hair on his face was. 'Maybe it—'

"There you go." I blinked in surprise at mi papá's voice, a part of me stupidly expecting some foreign language to spout from the intruder's mouth. 'He's not an alien. Even if he was, why on earth would he be focused on you, when there's literally billions of other people out there more interesting?'

"—comfortable?" I blinked at mi papá, barely catching the end of his question. He looked at me expectantly, and I nodded, figuring I had a fifty-fifty chance of responding correctly.

Mi papá raised an eyebrow, sighing. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he knelt in front of me, his eyes roving over my face like I was a map he was trying to read. I tried to remain cool and collected, but I could feel myself wilting under the intense scrutiny. 'I should have shook my head no. I should have known better than to guess. I should have—

"Miguel—" mi papá smiled weakly— "I asked you if the sweater was warm enough, or if you wanted something more comfortable."

'Oh. Well that's not fair. You had to go and give me a question that requires a verbal response, didn't you? Just as bad as the teachers, giving us an essay question in place of—'

I startled at the slight shaking of my shoulders. Mi papá was staring

at me, the wrinkles on his forehead prominent under his wide eyes and scrunched brows. His teeth gnawed on his lip, something I'd seen him do a lot whenever Coco was sick or particularly fussy.

'Is he...concerned? About what?' I forced myself to pay attention as he opened his mouth.

"You've been spacing out a lot. That, with your head injury..." he trailed off, his lips pursing. " It's not a good combination."

My expression must have shown how much I did not like where this conversation was going, because he frowned slightly, before giving a low groan. I could practically hear the cogs turning in his head, and I fidgeted, impatiently waiting for a verdict.

Finally, he removed his right hand from my shoulder, using it to rub his eyes. "Alright. I'm giving you two choices." He held up two fingers, as if to emphasize his point. "You can either, one—" he held up his pointer finger— "agree to go to the hospital with me, right now, and get checked out."

I violently shook my head side to side, only stopping once the dizziness and nausea the action gave me made me feel like I was going to puke. 'Maybe mi padre does have a point.' I begrudgingly admitted to myself. 'My head does kinda feel like a battered piñata.'

"Or two—" he paused as he held up a second finger, and I internally cringed at being talked to like a three-year-old— "you can go down with me, have dinner, and then sleep in your mother's and my room tonight, so that I can wake you up periodically to make sure you're fine."

I involuntarily scoffed as he said the second option. "Weren't you the one who said less than a week ago that I need to "grow up", and stop sleeping in your bed? I mean, I know you said I can come to you if I have nightmares—but sleeping in here *always*? Isn't that a little...extreme?" I questioned, fighting the urge to roll my eyes at how inconsistent mi padre was being lately.

"I changed my mind." He stated bluntly, tone deadly serious. "I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone, knowing that you are both

injured, and have picked up the habit of disappearing off to who knows where with musicians who should be *dead*." He ran his hand through his hair, making it stick up funny. Even his eyes seemed slightly wild as they bored into mine.

"You will be explaining that eventually as well, Mijo. Along with how you suddenly developed the power of teleportation over night." He said, making me gulp.

'There is literally no answer I can give that will be even slightly believable, is there? Maybe I can claim it was a magic trick—'

"Well, Miguel?" Mi padre once again interrupted my train of thought. "Which will it be?"

Confessions

Hey guys, it's been a while, and I am so sorry. I really struggled with this chapter, mainly because I have multiple avenues that I want to go down for this story, and I have to pick ONE, but I think this is as good as I'm going to get this chapter. I wanted to say THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR COMMENTS!!! I absolutely loved them (especially yours EmilieProctor ;)). I hope you enjoy, and be on the lookout for another update soon because I hope to post again next week! Hope you guys have a great Memorial Day weekend! And feel free to comment on any misspells or mistakes!

Miguel's POV

I groaned, closing my eyes as I contemplated the two options. "I'll sleep here tonight. But do I have to go to dinner? I'm not even hungry."

Mi papá pursed his lips slightly, before smiling. "Tell you what. I'll let you eat anything you want, as long as we have it in our house. How does that sound?" He asked, placing his hands on his hips.

I squinted at him. "Anything? Anything at all?" I questioned, incredibly skeptical of his offer. "Even if I just want some pan dulce?"

He squinted right back at me, visibly thinking over his response. "I would like you to have something a bit more substantial than that, but if that is all you want, then that's fine for now." He paused, then added, "but only because you're not feeling well."

I blinked. 'It's like he thinks I'm a toddler who's only going to ask for ice cream, or something.'

"Papá, I'm *fine*. Seriously. But, I wouldn't mind some of the leftover rice? And maybe some water..." I trailed off, wincing slightly at the thought of eating at the dinner table again. All those eyes, and the

questions, and *Abuela*—

"Can I just eat up here, though? Please? I just—I don't feel like being around everyone right now." I squeezed the edges of the folded up sweater to stop the trembling of my fingers from being quite so obvious.

'He may not agree with how Abuela acted, but how do I explain the way I tense up when she's near? How could I tell him that the thought of eating in the same room as her made my stomach roll over itself over and over?'

Mi padre must have still understood what I didn't say, because he stood for a moment staring at the scab on my face. When he finally answered with a hard nod, I wasn't sure if I felt better or worse for having gotten my way. I didn't want him to think badly of Abuela, or to be the reason they were fighting, but I also felt so much relief knowing I wouldn't have to eat with her staring me down.

Maybe my shoulders drooping was a bit too obvious, because mi papá grimaced, sighing heavily. Leaning forward, he put both hands on either side of my face, before looking me square in the eyes. "I promise you, Mijo. As long as I am there, Abuela will never hurt you again. *Never*." He repeated emphatically, tugging me into a hug. He ran one of his hands gently through my hair, while his other lay on my back, holding me close to his chest.

Breathing in deeply, I forced myself to relax, letting go of all of the anxious tension I hadn't even noticed until now. I would never admit it out loud, but the hugs did help remind me that I wasn't alone, and that I was safe. And despite my anger at being treated like a kid half my age, I could reluctantly admit to myself that they felt *good*. The hugs from my dead relatives were nice, and I was grateful for them, but they were...different; being hugged by someone alive, someone who was full of warmth, and had a strong, steady heartbeat to listen to...well. It was just—better. Even if I felt a little awful for making the comparison, when my dead relatives had, overall, been much nicer.

I waited for him to pull away for what seemed like forever. I knew the feeling of time dragging by wasn't only in my head, because I

could see how less and less of the sun's light filtered into the room. I even started counting the seconds mentally at one point, but gave up after around six minutes.

Just as my arms were starting to hurt from keeping them lifted for so long, I heard mi papá's stomach growl. Deciding that the hug had gone on for long enough, I pulled away.

I swallowed, surprised at the lump in my throat. "You, uh...might want to get that food, now." I commented lightly, looking at everything in my room but mi padre. 'This is stupid. I shouldn't be embarrassed because of a hug. I wasn't even the one that started it, and everyone hugs their parents!' I mentally scolded myself, wishing that I had a better handle on my emotions today.

"Yeah, probably." Mi papá agreed, running his hand through his hair again. He walked to the door, opening it, before pausing.

Slowly, he turned to face me. "You'll still be here when I get back, right?" His eyes narrowed. I nodded, keenly aware of the fact that the level of trust between us at the moment was equivalent to a thin sheet of ice. 'I suppose that might partly be my fault, though. I mean, I've been secretly listening to and playing music long before Socorro came around.' I admitted to myself begrudgingly. 'But in truth, there's really not much he *can* do besides trust that I won't lie —he can't exactly stop magical powers.'

I could see that mi padre was still hesitant, but he eventually left, closing the door quietly behind him. I stood in the middle of the room awkwardly for a moment, wondering what to do now. Spinning slowly, I allowed myself to fully take in the room. I could see a lot better now under the glow of the ceiling lights than I could the other night with the dim glow of the bedside lamp.

Unfortunately, there really wasn't a whole lot to see. At least, nothing in plain sight. 'I could snoop around in those...' I glanced at the chest of drawers mi papá hadn't emptied. '*But*, who knows just what I'll find in *there*,' I shuddered, shaking my head as if that could somehow remove the mental images now seared in my mind.

Moaning, I flopped backwards onto mis padres' bed. Closing my

eyes, I thought about how I was going to explain the past couple of weeks to mi familia.

"Preferably without sounding like a lunatic, so Mamá and Papá don't think I need to be sent to an asylum." I muttered to myself, rubbing my eyes.

I yawned. Part of me just wanted to go back to sleep, and never wake up again, so I wouldn't ever have to deal with, well...*any* of this. But, a bigger part of me *wanted* my family to know, for them to understand just how *great* Papá Héctor was!

'Maybe I could just take them with me to la Tierra de los Muertos?' I grinned so widely it hurt, imagining how happy everyone would be to get to have such a special family reunion. 'There would be laughing, and crying, and hugs! And Mamá Imelda could sing, while Papá Héctor could juggle his head, and—'

My train of thought was derailed as I remembered how I reacted to seeing Mamá Imelda sing, not to mention how I reacted to seeing a skeleton for the first time. 'Maybe that isn't such a good idea. I mean, who knows how that place will affect other people who are still living. It's a miracle that I can stay there for hours and be fine, but that's probably not something I should risk with everyone else.'

Sighing, I jumped off the bed, running my hands through my hair. I glanced at the clock on the small bedside table, gaping in disbelief at the time. Lamenting the fact that it had only been five minutes, I collapsed back onto the bed with a groan.

Having resigned myself to waiting in mind-numbing boredom for at least another fifteen minutes, I shot straight up when I heard the door start to open. Expecting mi madre, or someone worse, I was shocked to see mi papá walking through, balancing a tray of food with two glasses of water on top.

"That was quick!" I remarked dryly, impressed by how fast he got everything put together. I would have been more astonished if I didn't recognize that the reason he was probably so fast was because he wanted me alone for as short a time as possible.

My eyes widened at just what was on the tray, however. There was rice and water, but also—

"Churros?! Where on earth did you get churros?"

My jaw was practically touching the floor at this point. 'If mi papá's goal was to shock me to death, he's well on his way to succeeding! First the coddling, then the sweater, now this!'

"You and Mamá never get churros! You always say that they're unhealthy, and too expensive!"

Mi papá set the cups on the bedside table, and the tray down on the bed behind me. Rubbing his neck, he glanced at me for a moment, before falling like a puppet with its strings cut onto the mattress. "Miguel, when you disappeared like you did...everyone panicked. I —*we*—spent *every minute* since your disappearance last night, until your miraculous reappearance this morning, searching *everywhere*."

He clenched his fingers around his knees, though not before I noticed how they trembled. "We checked everywhere. Your mother and cousins scoured the house and workshop for you, while I and your uncles and aunts combed through the city. We checked your school, the library, your favorite bakeries and restaurants, mi dios, we even checked the *plaza*! Even your abuelos were helping, calling all the local hospitals and trying to get the police to help." He inhaled sharply through his nose, turning his head. I noticed for the first time the stubble on his chin and cheeks, and wondered how I had missed it earlier when mi papá usually shaved every morning.

"I bought these churros, hoping that someway, somehow, you'd find your way home. Words—" he cut himself off, visibly swallowing, before letting out a breathy, broken laugh. "Words can't *begin* to describe how worried I was. You just vanished! Into thin air!" He violently wiped the tears from his eyes.

"We were this close—" he held up two fingers, less than an inch apart. "*This close* to calling el maldito *morgue*!" He hissed, his face contorting into something scrunched up and broken and *wrong*. "The only reason we didn't, is because we hoped you were hiding away in the same place you did on Día de los Muertos," he

confessed, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Not that I ever *bothered* to figure out where that was, fool that I am."

I bit my lip, wondering if I was meant to hear that last muttered sentence. Damp eyes locked onto mine, and I wasn't sure how to react. It was bad enough when mi mamá started crying, but mi papá? I was at a complete loss.

My mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. Taking a deep breath, I inched closer to him on the mattress, before awkwardly patting his shoulder. "I'm *fine*." I smiled tightly, kind of wishing I hadn't made such a big deal out of the churros at this point. "But I—I don't think you'll believe me, even if I tell you where I was." I let my hand fall to my lap, staring at the wooden floorboards. "*I* wouldn't believe *myself* if I hadn't lived it."

I heard a slight crinkling, before a plastic wrapped churro entered my line of sight. My smile relaxing, I grabbed the deep-fried stick, taking a bite. Even though it was no longer fresh, the crunch of the churro combined with the sugary cinnamon taste left me feeling warm inside.

"I can't promise to completely understand what has been happening the past couple weeks." Mi papá wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "But I can promise to listen, and try to see it through your eyes. I—I trust you, Miguel."

I eyed mi papá out of the corner of my eye, not bothering to hide my disbelief.

"And while you're good at keeping secrets, you're a pretty terrible liar."

I huffed a laugh at that, covering my mouth so sugar wouldn't go flying everywhere. I said nothing as I continued to chew, mulling over my thoughts.

We sat in silence as I finished eating, before I crumpled the wrapper in my hand, tossing it back onto the tray. Sighing, I laid my head on

mi papá's shoulder, knowing I couldn't avoid talking anymore. "If I'm going to do this, I need you to promise not to interrupt, no matter how confused, angry, or shocked you get. I'll make it short, but no talking, or—or making any noises till the end. Okay?"

There was a tense moment, where I thought mi padre would disagree, before—

"Alright, Mijo." Mi papá gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "I won't interrupt. I promise."

Closing my eyes, I began.

"When I was four, I saw Tío Berto hiding money under Rosa's pillow. I figured out that night that the Tooth Mouse wasn't real, and I—I wasn't all that upset. Free money to spend at the market was still money, even if it didn't come from a fantasy creature. And I really wanted to buy a race car that I saw at the—"

I grimaced, interrupting myself. "I'm getting off track. The point is, I figured that all of the mythological creatures and traditions we had were just that—mythological. Everything from Papá Noel, to—to la Tierra de los Muertos." I stuttered.

"But this Día de los Muertos...I realized the hard way just how wrong I was." My stomach was like a boat in a storm, the churro I'd just eaten threatening to make a reappearance. "La Tierra de los Muertos...it's real. It's beautiful, chaotic, crowded and 100% *real*." I clasped my hands together tightly, my nerves making them shaky and clammy.

"And I know, because I went there."

I could feel mi papá's eyes on me. I hated it. It was like I had just given a horrible performance, and this was the split second left before the audience's shock turned to disgust. If I was being completely honest, I wanted nothing more than to forget that these past few days, past few *weeks*, had ever happened. But I also hated myself for wanting that, knowing I was Papá Héctor's only hope.

I cringed, plowing on. "Look, I know it sounds crazy. And, I don't

have any evidence or anything to give you. And I know I haven't always been the most honest with you and Mamá." I sighed, trying to come up with the words I needed to explain my experiences to someone who probably thought I had just hit my head too hard.

"I know that you probably don't trust me the most right now, especially because of the whole music fiasco on Día de los Muertos, and disappearing last night. But I stole a guitar, and I know that's wrong! I do! I thought that it would be fine because it technically belonged to our family anyway, but it wasn't. And when I stole the guitar, I was cursed, and because of that I became, like, a ghost? A spirit?"

I squinted, then physically shook that thought away for later. "I met Mamá Imelda, Papá Julio, Tíos Victoria, Rosa, Óscar, and Felipe, and...Papá Héctor. They gave me their blessing, so that I could come back to the land of the living."

I licked my lips, trying to think carefully about what to say next. "But it had a condition." I blinked rapidly, hating how much my eyes stung. "One that I broke. And that's—that's why Papá Héctor showed up here."

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to stop talking and wait for mi padre to say something. I wasn't sure if he would ridicule me, placate me, or berate me for lying. I didn't really think he'd believe me, no matter what he had said earlier. Even with Papá Héctor showing up, I knew my story sounded too crazy for him to think I was telling the truth.

What felt like hours passed, but still mi padre didn't respond. I couldn't even bear to look at him, terrified of what his expression would be.

Finally, after what seemed a short eternity, I couldn't take it anymore. "Look, Papá—" I pushed his lax arm away, standing up. "I know it sounds like a fairytale. But I *promise* it's true. And—and whether or not you believe me won't change that."

When nothing but silence answered me again, I began to walk to the door. "I'll give you some time to—to process it all, I guess." I

muttered, figuring that nothing short of an earthquake or fire would break mi padre out of his state of shock.

But as soon as I reached the door, a hand clasped tightly onto my shoulder. Freezing, I allowed myself to be turned around, making sure my eyes were sealed shut. As stupid as it seemed, I just knew that seeing mi papá look at me like I was a freak would hurt more than anything else I'd been through in the past two weeks.

"Miguel, please. Open your eyes."

I shook my head roughly, unable to explain my logic. Mi padre sighed, and I felt his hand leave my shoulder, only for both of his hands to then settle on either side of my head. Slowly, he rubbed his thumbs across my cheeks.

"I don't know yet whether I believe you are telling the truth."

I tensed, bracing myself for the next words that would come out of mi papá's mouth.

"But I do know that *something* happened. I know that ever since Día de los Muertos, you've been acting...different. And not in a good way. I'm *worried* about you Mijo, and—"

"I know I sound crazy, Papá." I interrupted, my eyes flying open. I was terrified of his rejection more than I could ever put into words, but I needed him to see that I couldn't possibly be lying. "I know what I said sounds impossible. But what happened on Día de los Muertos is over. I may have an...I don't know, a *gift* because of it, but I'm back home, and I'm *fine*." I emphasized, trying to ease the creases in mi papá's forehead.

Instead mi papá's brows furrowed further, while his grip on my face tightened. "You stopped *breathing* earlier, Mijo! That's not *fine*! And —and I couldn't do anything about it, because for the first time in your life, there was no—no *tangible problem* for me to solve. You're fighting these invisible diablos, and I have no idea why, or how to help you, and I'm *terrified of losing you to them*."

He tugged me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me and

cupping the back of my head. Startled, I stumbled slightly, and would have fallen if not for the tight grip I suddenly found myself in. Still, I was grateful for the long hug this time, if only because it allowed me to think about what mi papá had said.

'I've been so focused on trying to get Mamá Coco to remember more, and just doing my best to pretend like the nightmares and hallucinations didn't happen. Even when Papá Héctor told me about panic attacks and ASD, I didn't really stop to think about what that meant. And maybe...'

I swallowed the lump in my throat, scared to even think what part of me already knew.

'Maybe I'm not fine.'

I shifted my head, trying to move away from the wet spot left on mi papá's shirt.

'But maybe that's okay, for now.'

Hurt and Comfort

Miguel's POV

"I didn't mean to worry you." I finally whispered. "I was just so focused on finding a way to keep playing music, that I completely forgot about everything else. I didn't—didn't mean for everything to go so wrong."

"Ay, Mijo. I don't blame you." Mi papá gave me a tight squeeze, before letting me go. "Am I disappointed in you for ignoring our family's rules? Yes. But the blame can't lie entirely with you." He grimaced, his mustache bristling.

"We should have noticed that you were running off. Granted, we were busy with baby Coco these last three months, but something tells me your interest in music changed to obsession long before she was born." Mi papá gave me a small smirk, and I grinned sheepishly back at him.

"I will neither confirm nor deny that," I responded with a nervous chuckle. "As I get the feeling I'm already in a bit of trouble for the whole disappearing thing."

"Yes, we will have to talk about your punishment for that as well." He affirmed, making me cringe slightly. "But back to your story."

I could feel my heart start to beat faster, thudding almost painfully against my ribs.

"I want to believe you. I *do*." Mi papá emphasized, grabbing my shoulders. "I just—I need a few days to—to process it all, okay? And in the meantime, I need you to stay in this...this realm, alright?"

I frowned, opening my mouth to argue—

"Even if everything you did say was true—" he continued, cutting me off. "La Tierra de los Muertos was made for *dead people*. Who

knows how dangerous it is to just go walking down the street there? And what if someone tries to kidnap you? Or, or experiment on you? How could you hope to fight against someone who can't be hurt?" Mi papá questioned, his voice harsh but filled with worry as well.

"I—I would have gotten help..." I trailed off, dropping my head. "But I do see your point." I admitted, shivering against my will. "I do not want to be a skeleton anytime soon."

Mi papá put his finger under my chin, lifting my head. I looked up, surprised to see a small smile on his face. He ruffled my hair gently, and I groaned, trying to arrange the strands back into place. 'I know it wasn't the neatest already, but *still.* Sometimes I think he knows just how long it takes for me to fix my hair after he messes with it, and then musses it up anyways.'

Mi papá sat back down on the bed, tugging me into his lap with the hand he still had on my shoulder. Grumbling, I tried to break free from his octopus-like grip, but gave up when he only held me more firmly.

"¡Papá!" I whined, dragging out the word. "Let me gooooo." I whined, leaning my head back onto his chest with a huff. "I want to go do something. I'm bored." I complained, giving him my best puppy eyes.

Mi papá smirked. "We could go lend a hand in the workshop. I'm sure they would *love* help making shoes!"

I flinched, immediately realizing my mistake. "Ya know, when you put it like that...the bed is so nice and comfy, I think we should just stay here and sit for a while. A good, *long* while. Maybe even forever!" I proposed in a cheerful tone, my smile so big it hurt.

He laughed. "You changed your mind quicker than tu mamá changed moods when pregnant with Coco." He commented dryly. "One of these days we'll find you a job in the workshop that you like, just you wait."

"Maybe I could just serenade the customers while they get their feet

measured." I suggested, figuring it was better than outright destroying his hope. "Just picture it! People would come from miles around to get not only the best shoes in the world, but an entertaining performance as well."

Mi padre tilted his head, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Maybe once the rest of the familia gets used to having music again, you can do that once or twice a week. *But*—" he squeezed my arms lightly—"only if you promise to work hard at mastering some sort of shoe related skill at least two other days of the week."

I groaned, flopping back against his chest. "Fiiiiiiine. I guess that's alright. Maybe I could even design a pair of shoes that made music as you walked. Like tap shoes, but they'd play your favorite instrument."

Mi papá laughed. "Now that would be interesting to see. And hear!" I chuckled with him, imagining the chaos of children running around at school, the air filled with the sounds of tambourines, guitars, pianos, and trumpets every time a foot touched the ground.

The laughter faded as I leaned my head back against mi papá's neck. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to appreciate this moment of peace. It felt like forever since I'd just spent time with him, without the distraction of work, or food, or *babies*. I didn't want to admit it, but it was really...nice.

"I've missed talking with you, Mijo." He whispered, letting his head rest gently on top of my own. Sighing softly, he began to sway gently from side to side, as if to an inaudible tune. I smiled slightly as I moved back and forth, remembering the days long gone that I would fall asleep whenever he did this.

I fought back a yawn, trying to reach up and rub my eyes, before realizing my arms were still pinned to my sides. I huffed a small laugh, resting more and more of my weight against mi papá, until the only thing keeping me against him were his warm, steady arms. I had just enough time to realize the strange, swaying trick still worked on me, before I fell asleep once more.

Enrique's POV

I smirked, filled with fondness as I watched Miguel's breathing slow down, until he relaxed fully, asleep once more. 'I'm glad some things haven't changed.' I thought, ceasing my gentle rocking. 'Even if so much else has.'

Sighing, I closed my eyes. 'He's lying to me, though. He has to be! Going to la Tierra de los Muertos, bringing Papá Héctor back to life, spooky magical powers...how is any of that possible!' I pursed my lips, fighting back a groan. 'But he vanished into thin air, right in front of our eyes! How else could that possibly be explained if not by magic?'

I took a deep breath. 'One thing at a time.' I reminded myself, removing one of my arms from around Miguel's chest and positioning it under his knees. I slowly stood up, freezing when I heard the wooden floorboards creak beneath my weight. I didn't dare breathe as I waited to see if Miguel would stir, silently praying that I would have some good luck for the first time in the past week.

Miguel shifted slightly in my grip, before stilling. Exhaling in relief, I tiptoed to the side of the bed, trying my best to avoid any boards that seemed particularly dry and old. Glancing down at the bed, I debated the best way to pull down the covers without letting go of Mijo. I frowned, wishing (not for the first time) that Luisa wasn't such a stickler about everything being neat and orderly, from a filing system for all of our documents to a bed that would put an American soldier's to shame.

'Nothing I can do now though, I suppose, so—' I set Miguel down on top of the blankets. Leaning over him, I reached my arm out to the other side of the bed to where the blanket was tucked in tightly under the mattress. I gave the cloth a sharp tug, grinning at my success when I felt the tension give. Slowly, I stood up straight, laying the half of the blanket Miguel wasn't sleeping on over his slumbering form.

I took a moment to appreciate the peaceful look on Miguel's face, wishing I could take a picture of this moment. 'When was the last time I tucked him into bed? A week, a month, longer? When did I stop?' I rubbed my eyes, realizing once again just how many

mistakes I'd made as a Papá since Socorro came along. 'Maybe even from before then, too, considering he's certainly been playing that guitar of his for longer than that. And—and *three years, how*—'

As quietly as possible, I turned the lamp on, carefully tiptoeing to the side of the room to turn off the lights. Walking stealthily back to Miguel's side, I stood watching him for a moment, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do in a situation like this.

I moved the tray to the bedside table first, then picked up the stool that mi amor kept by the table to use when doing her makeup. 'I really hope that this holds my weight.' I grimaced, sitting down on the small, faded chair. I'd been told that it was a gift from Mamá Imelda to Elena when she became a "woman", whatever that meant.

'Regardless of how angry I am at her now, I won't stoop to her level and go destroying prized possessions on a whim. I'm better than that.' I told myself as I watched Miguel's chest rhythmically rise and fall. 'That, and Luisa would be pissed.'

I sat in silence for a few minutes, my back already starting to hurt. 'Is it fine to leave him for the night? Or should I sleep here in case he wakes up?' I wondered, contemplating what I should do.

But then I shuddered, remembering vividly the image of mi hijo, panicking and gasping for air on the floor. 'I can't let myself fall asleep and risk not being there to help him through another one of his...episodes. I've got to find some way to stay awake.' I realized, glancing around the room. I smiled at the sight of one of Luisa's books beside the still-full plate of rice.

Grabbing it, I frowned at the title. '*Learning How to Fall*, huh? Sounds like a crappy romance novel written by a teenager.' I scrunched up my nose, looking around for something else to distract myself with.

Seeing nothing, I rolled my eyes, before opening to the first page. 'It's better than nothing, I suppose.' I thought, grabbing the rice Miguel had left untouched.

"'*Why do you hate me?' I questioned the fickle hair gods...*"

I winced, mentally preparing myself for a long night of teenage drama. 'Once they turn thirteen, it's like a switch—' I froze, looking between mi hijo and the book, before cursing under my breath. 'I suppose I better get used to it now. I just hope, for the sake of my sanity and heart, this counts as his "teenage rebellion".'

•~•

""Just forget I said anything. Nothing can come of it—"

I tore my eyes away from the book at the sound of the sheets ruffling. Noting what page I was on, I set the book back down on the bedside table. I gaped at the time on the clock, not believing what I was seeing. 'I've been reading that thing for two hours?! How have I—'

"*No..."*

I looked back at Miguel, listening closely to the near-silent words he was muttering. His face was scrunched up, and his eyes moved rapidly underneath their lids. Cautiously, I stood up, not sure what to do in a scenario like this. 'Is it better for him to keep sleeping? Will the nightmare pass on its own? Should I—'

I leapt back as Miguel almost hit me in the chest with his wildly swinging arms. I froze from my spot a few feet away now, and was searching for a gap in his swings, when he started shouting. I did little but stare in horror as a litany of agonized denials fell from his lips.

'What on earth...?'

Deciding to just power through his swings now, I moved forward to shake him awake, when one particularly strong flail sent Miguel falling off the bed. Lunging forward, I barely caught him before his head could hit the floor, or worse, the edge of the table.

The movement must have woken him at last though, because Miguel gasped, his eyes flying open.

"No! Stop! Get away from me! I promise I won't tell anyone, just please, let me go! Please, I—" Miguel thrashed in my arms, tears

streaming down his face.

"Miguel, it's me! Tu papá! It was just a nightmare, you're alright." I sat down on the bed, holding him close to me as I ran my fingers through his hair. "Shhhhh, it's okay. I'm here. You're safe. It's not real, Mijo."

Miguel fought against me as I continued to whisper reassurances. His ragged breathing slowly returned to normal, until finally, he laid his head on my shoulder, gripping my shirt weakly in his hands.

"Papá...?" He croaked, sniffling.

"I'm here, Mijo. I'm here." I murmured, cupping his face with my hand and gently wiping away his tears. "You're alright. It was just a nightmare."

I rocked him gently back and forth as his crying gradually died down, leaving him hiccuping softly. Eventually, even those noises faded, as his body relaxed into a slumped position against my chest. I couldn't describe how glad I was that, while the nightmare seemed to have rattled Mijo, it didn't leave him with a stopped heart.

I felt a bit stupid now, for not having called Luis. 'What if he has another attack like before, and you didn't take the time you had to prepare for it? You could have called tu cuñado, but instead you read—'

"I didn't mean to wake you up. I'm sorry."

I had to fight back a jump at his words, having thought he'd fallen back asleep. I squeezed him lightly, before carefully turning his head to have him face me. His eyes were noticeably puffy in the faint glow of the lamp, and dried tear tracks shined on his cheeks.

"Don't be." I smiled down at him, pushing back his too-long hair. "It's not your fault you had a nightmare. I'm just glad I was here for you when you woke up. And besides—" I gestured with my head to the book—"I was reading one of tu mamá's novels, not sleeping."

Miguel's brows furrowed as he eyed the cover. "But aren't all of her

books about, like...love and stuff?"

I opened my mouth. And then closed it.

"W-well, I mean..." I looked around the room to avoid meeting mi hijo's eyes. "That book isn't *just* about love. It's actually pretty decent so far." I admitted begrudgingly, not sure if I was happy or sad about that fact.

"For a lovey-dovey book" I quickly added, looking back at mi hijo at the sound of his muffled snort.

"Just how far into it were you?" He asked, smirking.

"Chapter 16..." I muttered, beginning to wish I'd just come out and told him I was watching over him as he slept.

"What? I couldn't hear you." Miguel questioned, a smile growing on his face.

I groaned, though secretly it was nice to see a happy expression on him for once. "Chapter 16." I replied louder, bracing myself for the mocking.

Miguel stared at me for a moment, before bursting into laughter. "You—you always tease Mamá about her awful taste in books, but you're just as bad! Wait til she finds out!"

I froze, realizing that I might have miscalculated here. "No, no, *no*. You can't tell her! I'll never hear the end of it, Mijo!" I exclaimed, shaking my head violently back and forth.

I didn't think it was possible for Miguel to laugh any harder, but he proved me wrong. His laughter was so loud, I wouldn't be surprised if la familia downstairs could hear it through the floorboards.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. I'm sure someday you'll like romance books like this too." I goaded him lightly, grinning at the sight of mi hijo laughing so carefreely. 'If only this moment could last forever.' I thought wistfully.

Miguel scoffed, giving me an affronted look. "You'll never catch me

reading such a cheesy book!"

I shrugged. "I suppose time will tell." I chuckled as Miguel muttered rebuttals under his breath. "Either way...I think it's time that you went back to sleep."

Miguel winced, the smile falling from his face. "I can't." He scowled, hanging his head. "I never fall back asleep after a nightmare."

I grimaced, pursing my lips. "Never?" I asked, rubbing Miguel's back. "And how often have you been having these nightmares?"

I felt Miguel tense "Just for a little while..." He mumbled, his fingers clenching around the rolled up edge of my sweater.

"How often, Miguel?" I repeated, frowning when he didn't answer.

"Every night since..."

"Día de los Muertos," I finished, fighting the urge to hit *myself* with a chancla for how foolish I'd been.

Miguel nodded. "But, it's fine!" He glanced up at me with a small smile. "I didn't get any nightmares last night, and the night before that, Papá Héctor—" he cut himself off with a wince, looking down again.

"That man was in your room?! How did no one—"

I cut myself off with a sigh, realizing I was only succeeding in scaring mi hijo. "It's fine, Miguel." I reassured him in as soft a voice as I could manage. "While we will have to eventually have a discussion about you running around with all these strange men, for now, please, just tell me what happened."

Miguel nodded, laying his head against my chest. "He, uh...he stayed the night in my room, 'cause he didn't exactly have anywhere else to stay. Ya know, what with him being dead for, like, a century." Miguel winced, as if just realizing how crazy he must sound.

"Anyway, he, uh...helped me calm down, after I kinda...panicked."

Miguel admitted with a sniffle, his fingers spasming. "But, I'm not really tired right now anyway. I've probably slept more today than baby Coco has!" He exclaimed, swinging his legs.

I rolled my eyes, amused as ever by his evasion tactics. "I wouldn't go *that* far." I disagreed dryly. "And if you don't sleep now, you'll end up falling asleep tomorrow."

Miguel groaned, breaking out of my arms suddenly and flopping back against the bed. "I know that already. But knowing I should sleep doesn't help me actually sleep." He retorted, draping an arm over his eyes.

I hummed. "Maybe some warm milk will help? Or a story?"

Miguel removed his arm from his face. "Papá, I'm twelve. Not *five*." He deadpanned, before sighing softly. "And I tried those last week." He quietly admitted.

I slouched, sensing the deep frustration in his response. "Well, what did Papá Héctor do that helped you fall back asleep?"

Miguel bit his lip, shrugging as much as he could while laying down. "He kind of, well...he—he sang." He mumbled, his eyes never once leaving the ceiling.

I lowered my head, sighing as I rubbed the bridge of my nose as dramatically as possible.

"Well, just don't go telling all your friends I sound like a wounded cat, okay?"

Miguel finally looked at me, his eyebrows scrunched up as he sat up, mouth opening and closing with no words coming out.

"What?"

I smirked.

"You didn't think you were the only one who had a music rebellion as a kid, did you?"

Upcoming Changes/Chapters

Hello everyone, it is I, the disappearing writer, reappearing after...*mentally counts*...far too long.

I have good news, and I have bad news.

The bad news! This is obviously not an update. Yeah...sorry.

The good news though! There will be a new chapter soon! Like, in a week soon:) I'm mainly writing this because I've made changes to the first thirteen chapters on a separate doc because I've grown a lot as a writer and needed to fix some inconsistencies and confusing parts. I haven't posted those changed chapters yet, and have left the old chapters, but will be replacing the chapters here currently with the updated ones when I post the new chapter. So if you reread this story a month from now and are wondering why it seems a little different, and the writing has changed a bit, that would be why.

But yeah, I'm excited to finish this story! I plan to have quite a few more chapters, and hope you guys enjoy them.

So anyways...hope you have a good day, and see you soon!

Revelations

I've been working on this chapter alone for literal years, and I'm sure some of you have been waiting for it for even longer😩 I hope you enjoy, and please leave stars/kudos and comments! I love hearing what you guys think ☺

Enrique's POV

Miguel gaped at me silently, his eyes wide.

"Better close your mouth, before you catch flies." I teased with a grin.

"When was this?! Why did you never tell me? Who else knows?" Miguel spluttered, each question sounding more hysterical than the next.

"In high school. And I never told you because I didn't want to encourage you to disobey your abuela." I sighed, shaking my head. "Not that *not telling* you really helped anything, I suppose."

Miguel at least had the good grace to look rueful at that comment.

"I was a bit older than you, and there was this festival coming up for Christmas. I really wanted to go with this girl I liked, but the problem was, I had no clue how to go about asking her." I confessed, rubbing the back of my neck. "She was a year older than me, and the prettiest girl in her class."

"And me, well..." I chuckled, recalling what I was like around twenty years ago. "Let's just say there weren't a whole lot of ladies lining up to go out with me, okay? My voice would squeak, and I was still growing into the gangly limbs I'd gained practically overnight." I admitted, remembering wistfully the days I used to come home from school and measure how tall I'd grown. These days I was trying to make sure I *wasn't* growing.

"What does that have to do with music though?" Miguel asked, interrupting my train of thought. He leaned forward, his eyes practically glowing with intrigue.

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there." I huffed a laugh, reaching down and ruffling his hair. "You're as impatient as the twins." I commented, ignoring his complaints and rebuttals.

"For two weeks, I spent every second of my free time hiding behind buildings by the plaza, straining my ears to hear the love songs being sung. I wrote down every lyric, reading them over and over before I went to bed," I said, feeling lucky in retrospect that my siblings never caught me in the act.

"A week before the festival, I was walking home, when I saw my crush walking in front of me, alone. I knew that that moment was the chance I was looking for. I ran up to her, pulled out a crumpled paper rose from my bag, and sang my heart out."

"What did she say?" Miguel asked, coming even closer.

"She told me that I sounded like a dying donkey."

Mijo gaped for a moment, before falling back onto the bed, laughing so hard that tears came to his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Unfortunately, I hadn't exactly realized that there was more to the whole singing thing than just making your voice sound pretty as you recite nice words." I winced, wishing I could have figured that out *before* I made a fool of myself.

"But!" I hurried to add, seeing Miguel had finally calmed down a little. "She did say yes."

Miguel's brows furrowed, and he threw his hands out wide. "But didn't you sound awful?"

I shrugged. "She said she'd go with me if I let her teach me how to sing. Apparently, it was a sin to leave a poor sap like me going around trying to seduce girls when I sounded like a yowling dog."

I didn't think it was possible, but Miguel's jaw fell even farther this

time.

"Just like that?" He demanded, his voice slathered in disbelief.

"Just like that. She took the flower, and said she'd be waiting for me to pick her up at seven," I said, judiciously leaving out the part where she told me she liked bad boys, and kissed my cheek, before walking away.

"Wow. Either that's made up—" Miguel shook his head, his eyes glazed over—"or that girl was *crazy."*

I smirked, having been waiting for him to say something like that. "Hey now—don't go insulting your mother." I teasingly scolded him.

Miguel's mouth was so large now, I could probably fit an apple in it. All he could do was blink at me for a few seconds, like my comment had somehow managed to fry his brain.

"That was *Mamá*?!" He finally squeaked, his expression similar to what I imagined one might look like when having an existential crisis.

I nodded. "Your mother, she...she gave up a lot, when she joined this family." I frowned, massaging my forehead. "I can't remember the last time I've heard her sing anything besides a few hushed lullabies to you and Coco."

Mijo scowled. "It's not fair." He crossed his arms, glaring up at the ceiling. "Why should Mamá and everyone else have to completely give up music, just because of something that happened, like, a century ago!"

I patted his knee. "Sometimes, the rules are there for obvious reasons. But sometimes...it's harder to see their purpose." I said, idly tapping his leg.

I closed my eyes, silently wishing I could give him a better response. 'But what would I say? That if I'm being honest, I'm not sure why Mamá is so strict on the ban? That it almost seemed like Mamá Coco disliked the fact that everything from guitars to drums were forbidden?'

"You have to understand, Mijo, that some wounds are big enough to span across entire millennia. And your abuela...she admired Mamá Imelda, and did her best to please her. I think that, in her mind, enforcing the ban is partly what keeps Mamá Imelda's memory alive." I said, giving him the best explanation I'd come up with in my thirty-seven years of life.

I glanced down at my son. "But, we've gotten off-topic. We were supposed to be trying to get you back to sleep." I commented dryly, fighting down a laugh at the unapologetic grin mi chiquito gave me.

"I don't know as many songs as your mamá, but I know a few." I stood up, tucking mi hijo back under the blankets, before sitting down next to his head.

Miguel gave me a doubtful look, probably wondering if he should try to plug his ears. Taking a sip of water from the bedside table, I said, " I may be a little rusty, but I'm not nearly as bad as I used to be. Trust me."

Mi hijo huffed, rolling onto his side and grabbing the pillow next to him. Turning back to me, he cuddled it close to his chest, before staring up at me expectantly. I blinked, clearing my throat as I tried to remember how the old tune started.

"Mi niño mi niño se va a dormir, todo en silencio está..."

I sang the lullaby that Luisa had taught me over a decade ago now, when we were struggling to put Miguel to sleep. For a moment, Miguel's eyes widened at the sound of my voice, giving away his clear surprise. I hadn't been lying when I said I'd gotten better with practice, and soon, Mijo's blinks were becoming longer and longer.

When he didn't open his eyes after ten minutes or so, I stopped singing, waiting for a moment to see if he would stir. Convinced he'd fallen back asleep, I glanced at the clock, surprised to see it was only around 10 PM. Then again, it did make sense in a way, considering mi amor hadn't come in yet to see what was happening.

We'd had a talk while searching for Miguel last night, about what to do if he came back. While we both wanted to watch over him, and

prevent anything like what happened from occurring again, we knew it wasn't realistic; we couldn't just forget about Coco, or ask for the rest of la familia to look over her until we decided we could be parents of two kids again. Not only would that not work long-term, it would backfire spectacularly when we went back to caring for Coco as well, leaving Miguel to fall through the cracks again.

So, we decided it would be for the best if I focused on Miguel, and she would try to give him as much time as possible when not caring for Coco. While I secretly thought she would be better at connecting with him, and making him feel safe and comforted, I couldn't argue when she mentioned I didn't exactly have the...equipment, for feeding a baby.

'What we need to do is come up with a system, so that this doesn't happen again.' I pulled out a pad of paper from the table, along with a pen. 'Maybe if I start by picking him up at school...? Would he like that though, or just be embarrassed?'

I pursed my lips, scratching out that idea. 'Maybe take him to the plaza after school a few days a week? I'm sure he'd like that, although...he doesn't have a guitar he can bring with him; and we really should figure out where he got that fancy white one, because it's certainly not his...'

I put a question mark by the plaza idea. 'Maybe we can get him a guitar, as an early Christmas gift. Mamá can scream and throw a fit as much as she wants, but if he wants to play the guitar, I'll find a way for him to be able to do it where she can't hear.'

I gripped the pen tighter in my hand. 'I need to have a conversation with her about how she treated Miguel. But I need—'

The door creaked open, and I tensed, only relaxing once Luisa popped her head through the crack. A smile spread across her face at the sight of Miguel sleeping, and she tiptoed into the room until she was at the foot of the bed. I watched her adjust the blankets for a minute, before slowly standing up, trying to avoid the springs from creaking. She shot me an inquisitive look, and I motioned for her to move back to the door so we could talk without disturbing our hijo.

"How is he?" She asked, glancing between me and our son.

I sighed, snaking an arm around her waist. "As good as can be expected, I suppose." I whispered back, wishing I had more good news to share. "I need to call the school tomorrow. He didn't give me names, but he's been being bullied for *three years, Luisa. Three years!"*

Luisa's eyes were shiny in the dim light as she cursed under her breath. "Shouldn't we take him to the hospital? What if he's hurt worse than we can see, and has internal bleeding? My brother—"

"Ay, I know," I nodded, slumping against the doorframe. "But Miguel was very against it."

Luisa's eyebrow raised. "Since when does what the child want have *any say* in whether or not he receives *medical treatment*? Especially considering he has a head wound!"

"Since he can disappear in the blink of an eye, and we would be separated from him while they made sure we weren't the abusers!" I hissed, pulling away to better face her. "And I am not very keen on the idea of leaving mi hijo with strangers at the moment!"

Luisa mimed zipping her mouth shut, pointing at Miguel. I glanced at him, having failed to notice the way he was shifting in bed, probably due to our talking. Well, *my* talking.

"I see your point, mi amor," Luisa murmured, grabbing my hand. "I just...I don't want to risk losing him because we were scared of him running away."

I rubbed my neck as I thought over what the best solution would be. "He has bruises here, here, and here—" I gestured on my chest and back. "Most of them are purple, but this one—" I pointed to my lower left side—"is a bit darker than the others. His head *seems* fine, and he's not had any memory issues, but he keeps zoning out." I admitted, remembering how hard it was to keep his attention earlier.

"So maybe a concussion?" Luisa asked, chewing her lip. "In that

case, he really shouldn't be going to school at all for the next couple of days."

I almost snorted at that. "Even if he doesn't have one, I'm not about to send him back to that place without finding out which cabrones *hurt my son*."

Luisa nodded, not even bothering to correct my language. I could tell by the way she was clenching her jaw that she was just as furious as I was, maybe even more so. While my anger tended to burn hot as a fire, Luisa's was like that of a well-fed jaguar: she would rather play with her food for days, than just go in for the kill right away.

'It is as terrifying as it is alluring,' I thought, imagining her cooly berating and demeaning each and every teacher, parent, and administrator that allowed this to happen, until they began to wish that she was yelling at them. 'Now if only we had names...'

Shaking my head, I realized that names would have to wait until tomorrow, when Miguel woke up. "Is Coco sleeping?"

"Yes, she should be fine for a couple of hours," Luisa glanced at the clock, before looking back at me. "Why?"

"I think it would be a good idea if you talk to your brother—" I gestured to the phone, making my way to the door, before pausing. "But be prepared in case Miguel wakes up—he almost rolled straight off the bed last time." I warned her, reaching for the door knob.

"Where are you going?"

I turned my head, giving mi amor a grin with perhaps just a few too many teeth showing. "I think it's time that mi mamá and I had a talk, don't you?"

Luisa's matching grin was one of the many reasons why I had married her. "Yes, I completely agree." She grabbed the phone, dialing her brother's number. "You'll have to let me know how it goes."

I pulled the door open, stepping over the creaky floorboard.

"I most certainly will."

•~•

It didn't take long for me to locate mi mamá, though she wasn't where I expected. She was in the kitchen, combining eggs and a milk mixture in a bowl. Usually she was getting ready for bed at this time, preferring to go to bed early and wake up with the sun. But it wasn't unreasonable to assume that meal prepping had been pushed back due to today's...events.

'And really, when I was a kid, meal prepping was just getting started now.' I thought, remembering the days I used to help Tía Rosita with the task while Mamá put Gloria to bed, and Papá helped Berto with his homework. It was...nice, to laugh and chat with her while we worked, and to hear stories about mi mamá when she was little.

Staring at the woman in front of me, I found it hard to understand how she was once the little girl in those stories, the one who used to sneak around to listen to music as well. Tía Rosita was never very clear on the details, but after the summer that Tía Victoria died, followed shortly after by Mamá Imelda...she was never the same.

I clenched my fists at my side. 'But that's not the reason I'm here right now.'

I walked into the room, my footsteps signaling my approach. Mamá glanced at me, tensing, before returning to kneading the dough in front of her. I took in the ingredients around her, noting with a distant sort of pleasure that she was making pan dulce, Miguel's favorite home-baked treat.

'She must have overhead me asking Berto if we had any,' I realized, remembering my rush to get food for Miguel before he could disappear again. 'We didn't, but he seemed to like the churros alright. Which I guess is good, considering he didn't even touch the rice...'

I pursed my lips, adding 'get Miguel to eat an actual meal' on my mental to-do list. I watched for a moment as Mamá melted butter in a pan on the stove, stirring it with her spatula. I wondered what her logic was behind this, if she wanted to use the pan dulce as an unofficial apology, or she just felt guilty over everything that had happened and this was helping her cope.

Either way, I reached over, turning the stove off. Ignoring her spluttered complaints, I stepped back and crossed my arms, waiting for her to quiet. Eventually, she stopped, shuffling over to the table with a sigh. If it were a different day, I might have pulled out the chair for her to sit in.

But it wasn't a different day, and mi hijo was lying in bed with a cut on his face that might permanently scar, and it was this woman's fault. So instead I stood there, waiting for her to sit down, and letting her fidget a bit in her seat before I began.

"You know, Mamá Coco used to tell me stories about what the plaza was like when I was little." I stared at my mother, watching as she ground her teeth at the mere mention of the place. "She'd tell me about the songs she'd dance to, and sing some to me before I went to bed sometimes, just quietly enough that *you* couldn't hear."

Mamá frowned.

"*Music* turned that man into el diablo—"

"She stopped eventually, of course," I plowed on, tilting my head. "But it was so abrupt, that years later I wondered if it was really her choice. Or maybe—" I leaned forward, grimly satisfied at the way mi mamá simultaneously pulled away. "She was told to stop—*warned*, more like."

Mamá bit her lip, saying nothing.

"And I accepted that. I did." I shrugged, a mechanical sort of lifting and falling of my shoulders. "And I didn't complain when you gave me the chancla, after finding those sheets of music I hid as a teenager."

I slammed my hands on the table palms down, relishing in her flinch. "But do you remember what I told you, when Luisa was pregnant with Miguel?"

"..."

"*Well?*"

"You...you mentioned that you were going to parent him differently." She muttered after several tense seconds, still refusing to look me in my eyes.

"*I told you we would not be using the chancla with our children. EVER!*" I hissed, the words like lava in my mouth. The way she shrunk in her seat was gratifying, especially when I considered how scared Mijo must have felt, surrounded by his familia, and only seeing a bunch of people bigger and stronger than him who did *nothing to help*.

"I should call *la policia* and have them take you away." I rose slowly from my hunched over position. "But I won't. Because as much as I detest you right now for what you have done, there are still people in this house who need you—Mamá Coco, especially."

Something about my words must have confused her, because when I paused, my mother opened her mouth, like it was her turn to speak. I held up a single finger, finding immense delight in the way her mouth slammed shut with a faint *click*. I eyed her a moment longer, imagining her face with a cut across her cheek. What she would look like with the injury she inflicted on *mi hijo*.

"You will not be permitted to see Miguel until he asks for you, at which point in time the *first thing* you will do is *apologize* for your behavior. You will not be allowed to watch Socorro either, until such a time as *I* deem you trustworthy again."

This time, when I stopped speaking, my mother merely glanced up, finally looking at me. I wasn't surprised at the tear tracks on her face, though a small part of me didn't think she deserved the right to cry over what I'd said—not after how she had acted. Not after she had used corporal punishment on *my child, her own grandchild*,

for simply refusing to *eat*.

"And if you ever even *think* about taking your chancla off in the same *room* my child is in, we will leave, and *never come back*."

I drank in the terror in her eyes at my words. The anger in me wanted to do more, say more, until she was left in a heap of sobs on the floor. But the rest of me said that this was enough, *had to be enough*, for now. Any second I spent away from Miguel was another one in which he could wake up without me there. I knew mi amor would watch over him, but I wasn't sure how Miguel would take it, when *I* had been the one to promise to be there.

I stepped away from the table, turning the stove back on. Mamá would have to shake herself out of her shock, unless she wanted the whole house to smell of burnt butter. And just as I was about to leave, I stood in the doorway, one last realization making me freeze in my tracks.

"You know, it's funny—Miguel spent an entire night with Papá Héctor, the man you hate and compared to the devil, and he came back bandaged and fed." I shook my head, the laughter spilling from my lips grating on my own ears. "But he spent ten minutes with you, and had a panic attack so bad ***he stopped breathing.***"

I ran my hand through my hair as I walked back the way I had come.

"And you call *him* el diablo?"

Difficult Conversations

Thor voice*: Another! *Slams laptop shut

***Ahem* Anywho...definitely meant it when I said I'm going to finish this thing ;) If you enjoyed the chapter, please leave a comment! They really do make my day ☺**

Miguel's POV

'Again with the sunlight.' I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, wishing that I could do something about the sun without having to get up. 'I should get a scarf to tie around my head when I go to sleep. Maybe then I wouldn't—'

"—care less who you connect me with, I want to know who's been *hurting mi hijo!*"

I froze mid-turn, realizing two important things at once: one, I was still in mis padres' bed, and had apparently spent the whole night there. Two, it was probably not just the sun that had woken me up today, but the sound of mi papá hissing complaints filled with various colorful words into the telephone. I couldn't hear everything that was being said, but it was enough to make me think that mi papá was in a foul mood.

'And I am not about to have that anger turned on me, thanks.' My movements concealed by the thick blanket, I pulled the foto out of my pant's pocket, gripping it tightly in my hand. I would need it just in case things went south once I 'woke up'.

Bracing myself for whatever reaction mi papá would have, I moved a bit, taking out my free hand to rub my eyes as I sat up. I couldn't hear exactly what mi papá was saying, but I could tell the moment he noticed I was awake in the way he immediately said he'd call the person back later, before slamming the phone down so hard I thought he'd break it. The noise made me flinch, and I couldn't help glancing between the phone and mi papá's stormy face.

"I can, uhm, go to my room? If you want to finish the call without me bothering you..." I offered quietly, not quite sure what to do. On the one hand, it didn't seem like he really wanted me out of his sight last night. But on the other hand...I had no clue who he was talking to with so much venom, and I wasn't entirely sure if I'd done something else wrong that he'd only just found out about.

"No, don't go, I was just—" mi papá cut himself off as his shoulders slumped. Running his hand through his hair, he walked over to the bed, sitting next to me. "I didn't mean to wake you up—I'm sorry, Chamaco," he offered me a tired smile, one that didn't quite seem real.

Slowly, I slid the foto back into my pocket under the covers, asking, "who was that on the phone? You sounded kind of...mad."

Mi papá's mustache moved up and down, like it did every time it looked like he was going to yell at me but then just said he was 'disappointed'. "That was your school," he said, his voice tight. "I was informing them that I'm taking you out until further notice."

I blinked at him, only just noticing that it was late enough I would be walking to school by now if I was attending today. Which I apparently wasn't. Because mi papá was *pulling me out of school—*

"*What?!*" I threw my arms up into the air. "What do you mean I'm not going to school?! You make me go every single day, even when Abel and Rosa skip, or it's like a freaking tornado out there!" I cried, gesturing to the window.

"Your education is important—"

"You make me go to school when I'm sick!"

"Everybody gets colds sometimes, Mijo—"

"My temperature was 38.4, and I got sent to the nurse's office after *throwing up* in the *cafeteria* in front of *half the school!*"

Mi papá opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "I recognize now that that wasn't the wisest decision on our part, but in our defense, we thought you were exaggerating." He grimaced, as

if the words didn't sound as good out loud as they did in his head.

I jumped off the bed with a huff, turning to face him better. "Why are you pulling me out? I can handle a few hours of school!" I crossed my arms, ready to defend my claim if necessary. If I was completely honest, I dreaded the thought of going back to school, and could think of little else that would be worse than being beat up again.

'Unfortunately, that 'little else' just so happens to be staying at home to be interrogated by mi familia,' I mentally grimaced, knowing that I was screwed no matter how this argument ended. 'But I can just skip first hour, and Jake and his buddies can't get me if I run home quick enough, so...lesser of two evils and all that.'

But mi papá was not backing down. Instead, he stood up too, his hands on his hips as he stared down at me, saying, "I don't think your head is okay, and I don't want you to go to school. You will stay home and rest, and Rosa will bring your work back for you to do here."

I stared at him, grinding my teeth so hard I wouldn't be surprised if one of them chipped. If you'd asked me a week ago, heck, even three *days* ago, how I'd feel about having a one-on-one conversation with mi padre, I would have been thrilled. 'I would have been ecstatic just to be in the same *room* as him for ten minutes.' I realized, finding that fact so hard to believe in this moment, where I wanted nothing more than for him to stop literally controlling my every action.

I clenched my hands, resisting the urge to scream. Instead, I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Yelling at mi padre wouldn't get me anywhere, except for maybe the shop, making shoes all day. So instead, I channeled as much calmness as I could manage into my voice, raising my chin. "Fine. I'm going to the bathroom."

I eyed mi padre for a moment, waiting for him to deny me the right to *pee*. I could tell he kind of wanted to, if his pursed lips and furrowed brows were any indication, but what was he going to do? Demand to *watch me* so I didn't disappear? 'I may not recognize this new...version, of Papá. But surely there's some things he still won't

do.' I reasoned, watching with a little delight as mi padre physically riled himself up more as he tried to come up with a suitable response.

I was about to head towards the door, taking mi padre's silence as permission, when he slumped like a puppet with his strings cut. Suddenly, all the stubborn bullheadedness was gone, leaving behind a man who just looked...exhausted, really. I eyed the bags under mi padre's eyes, wondering if he'd slept at all last night, or the night before even.

A part of me felt guilty, for being safe and warm in a comfortable bed both nights, while he stayed awake looking for me, and then after me. 'I mean, yeah, it is kind of his job. If parents aren't prepared for sleepless nights, they shouldn't be having kids in the first place.' I almost nodded in my conviction, my guilt fading, until I remembered everything that had happened in the last few days. 'But I don't think my parents realized they would be signing up for magical teleportation powers when they had me. Or dead relatives coming back to life.' I rubbed my neck, not quite sure what to do with these realizations.

"I want to go to school, Papá." I tried again, my voice lower and softer than it was earlier.

Mi papá nodded, running his hand down his face. "I know you do, Mijo. I just don't understand *why*. You've never wanted to go to school before!" He shook his head, floundering for a moment. "You've tried every excuse in the book, but *now*, when I'm telling you that you can stay home, suddenly going to school is all *you* want to do?!"

I tugged at my hair, feeling my own eyes practically bulging out of my skull. "Why do you not *want* me to go to school?! You *never* let me miss, so what's so important that I can't—"

"I can't keep you safe at school!"

My mouth slammed shut, my arms slowly falling to my sides. I watched as he huffed, his chest rising and falling in such exaggerated movements that I could see it through his shirt.

"I know you don't understand, Mijo—and I don't expect you to." He said, bridging the distance between us. "But some day, if you have kids, you'll understand me when I say that *nothing* else matters as much to me as you being *safe*, and *happy*, and *healthy*. And right now—" he breathed in sharply, just staring at me, and suddenly I felt so small, standing there in his too-large sweater—

He lifted his hands, settling them on my shoulders. Their weight, their *warmth*, felt...nice. "Right now, school is *none of that for you*." He hissed, his eyes practically begging me to listen to him. "And I don't know who is hurting you, so I can't make it better, which hurts me more than I could possibly describe. But if you—"

He swallowed, squeezing my shoulders. "If you're going to...to *leave*, if I don't let you go to school, then—then at least let me drive you, okay? I'll go get you a lunch, and I-I'll pick you up, too, so if you just look for the truck—"

I barreled into him so hard he let out an *oomph*. For a second, it was just me wrapping my arms around mi papá as far as they could go, but then his arms were around me too, and I knew I was getting his shirt wet, but I didn't care. I didn't think he'd care, either, which was really more important considering it was his shirt and—

"I was scared," I cried, ignoring the way a button was digging into my cheek, and how his arms were in a weird spot on my back. "I didn't—I don't want to have to talk about it again, and there's more I have to tell you, about what—what happened, but I don't—I *can't* —"

He shushed me, rocking our bodies back and forth in a soothing pattern. "You don't have to talk about it then, Mijo. I should've realized that you might not be ready to...to discuss it, yet." He rubbed a small part of my back, and I realized abruptly that his arms felt funny because he was trying to avoid my bruises, which made me cry harder for some reason.

"And if it's—if the reason you don't want to talk about it is because of the rest of the familia, then you can just talk about it with me," he continued, and I wanted that, I did, but—

"Isn't—aren't the rest of the familia going to be mad though? Abuela —"

Mi papá pulled away, squatting until we were the same height. "Miguel," he said, putting his hands on either side of my head. "Abuela is not going to be talking to you until you decide you're ready to see her. And *even then*, you're not going to be in a room with her without me or tu mamá present until *you* feel comfortable with that."

I froze, not sure what to say to *that*. 'No...no Abuela? No chancla? But she's practically the ruler of the family, why on earth would she agree to that? Won't that just make her *more* angry? And I eventually have to see her again, so—'

"*Breathe*, Miguel." Mi papá commanded, his thumb rubbing small circles on my unmarred cheek. His words made me realize that I'd started to hyperventilate, terrified as I was by my own thoughts. 'I'm such a baby, panicking over something that hasn't even happened yet! Why am I—'

"Mijo, talk to me. *Please*."

I tried to take a deep breath, but I kept getting interrupted by hiccups. "Sh-she's going t-to see me a-alone e-event-tually though, a-and then—"

"Mijo, I had a talk with Abuela. She will not be using her chancla on you ever again." Mi papá sounded so sure of himself, and I wanted to believe him, but I was just so tired of it all.

'I'm just so—so *tired*. I tried to convince myself that it didn't hurt when she hit me, that it didn't scare me to have her coming after me with her chancla raised high.' I sagged, the tension seeping out of my body all at once, leaving me feeling almost dizzy. 'But I just want to be somewhere safe, where I don't have to worry about being hit for doing the "wrong" thing.'

Avoiding his eyes, I whispered, "Papá I don't—I don't trust her."

I said it so quietly I wasn't sure he'd heard, until he tilted my head

up, catching my eyes. "I know, Mijo." His own eyes shone with unshed tears, and I hated this whole conversation because we both knew there was no good solution. Abuela could hit me tomorrow, and nothing would change, except for maybe mi papá talking to her and asking her not to again. We both knew who was really in charge, and this was how things were, and neither of us—

"I know this may not be much of a comfort, but if she even *tries* to hurt you again, we're leaving."

I blinked. In the past few days, mi papá had mentioned being concerned about my injuries, particularly my head. Yeah, it hurt, but I didn't think it was anything *really* serious. It wasn't the first time Jake and his friends had used my head as a fútbol, and I had had pain like this before, and it went away. Eventually. But now, I was starting to wonder if he was right and I had brain damage or something, because there was no way I'd just heard mi papá say what I think he said.

"I...I think we should call Uncle Luis, maybe. Because I just heard—"

"I mean it, Miguel." Mi papá looked me dead in the eyes. "If she hurts you, we'll start fresh somewhere else. Uncle Luis and Aunt Alyssa have always talked about your mamá moving back to the states, and—"

"You would...you'd just leave? What about—what about la tienda, and our familia, and school, and, and, and—"

"*Miguel*," mi papá motioned taking in a deep breath, and letting it out. I copied his breathing, trying to focus on the fact that nothing had changed *yet*, that everything was still the same as it was five minutes ago. I didn't—I didn't like how my cousins teased me sometimes, or want to spend my days making shoes once I finished school, but that—that didn't mean I wanted to *leave*.

"I just—we'd *leave* everyone?" I asked, my voice smaller than I meant it to be. I'd recently had a rather awful experience a couple weeks ago that taught me just how important family was, and now I could *lose it*? "I hate making shoes, but I don't want to *leave* Tío Berto, and Tía Gloria, and—

"*Hey, it's alright.*" Mi papá rubbed the fresh tears on my cheeks away, giving me a sad smile. "We can always just get a house nearby, and tu mamá and I could come and work here during the day." He sighed, his eyebrows furrowing. "I just won't have you stay in a home where you're not safe, okay?"

I nodded, my legs feeling like jelly at his words, and my head swimming with all of the ups and downs of this conversation. Mi papá stood up straight again, and I let myself fall forwards, trusting that mi papá would catch me.

He did, thankfully, muttering reassurances under his breath as he rubbed my back. He kept it up for a long time, too, waiting until even my post-crying hiccups were gone, before holding me at arm's length again.

"I need you to understand, Miguel, that whatever happens, it's not your fault. Do you understand?" He asked, his eyes roaming over my face.

I nodded, but my expression must have given me away, because mi papá frowned. "It is *not your fault*, Mijo. Can you—can you repeat that for me, please?"

"It—" I swallowed.

"It's not my fault."

"Again, Mijo. A little louder this time."

"It's not my fault." I said, my voice wavering a little less.

"Even louder." Mi papá commanded, a smile spreading across his face.

"It's *not my fault.*" I grinned back, my heart racing in a way that felt good for once, like when I got a song just right after practicing it for hours.

"Again!" Mi papá cheered, practically standing on the tips of his feet as he held tightly onto my hands.

"IT'S NOT MY FAULT!" I shouted, as loudly as I had at the talent show with Papá Héctor. I yelled the words again and again as we jumped up and down, mi papá letting out grito after grito each time I repeated the words.

It was great, and it felt amazing, and it was—

The door slammed open, Mamá storming into the room with Coco crying in her arms. "I don't know what is going on in here," she glanced between the two of us, her eyes wide and bloodshot. "But I'm going to need it to be quieter in here, *entienden*?"

Mi papá let go of my hands to raise his own in the universal sign for surrender. "Ah, sí. Lo siento, that was...that was my fault." He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. I couldn't help but snort, watching in amusement as mi mamá gave him a withering look, before coming and giving me a quick hug and kiss, and leaving the room with a still-crying Coco.

We stood in silence for a moment before we both started laughing, each of us shushing each other as we got loud enough we'd fear Coco would hear us again. It felt like hours passed when finally, our chuckles tapered off, leaving us gasping for breath, and I...

'I feel better than I have in a long time, even with the bruises and cuts,' I realized, looking up at mi papá. 'There was only one problem.'

"Uhm, Papá..."

He hummed, looking down at me.

"When I said I had to go to the bathroom earlier, that—that wasn't actually a lie."

He stared at me in confusion for a moment, before his eyes widened, and he slapped his forehead. "Dios mio, I'm an idiot," he muttered under his breath, opening the door to the hallway. "I'll bring some new clothes, so you can take a shower too, okay?"

I nodded as we walked down the hall in silence, and I watched mi papá head into my room, before going into the bathroom and

closing the door behind me. I removed the foto from my pocket, setting it on a dry area of the sink, hoping all the while that mi papá wouldn't find anything in my room that would get me into too much trouble.

'Well...more trouble than I'm already in, that is.' I corrected, a distinction I was starting to think I'd be using for a long while yet.

Meeting Martín

Hope you guys enjoy:) please leave a comment if you liked the chapter!

Enrique's POV

'I didn't know what I expected to see, but it wasn't...this.'

I looked around the sparse room for a moment, just taking everything I saw in. Where the room had once held around a dozen or so toys, some handed down from Rosa and Abel, others new, it was now empty of practically any personal touches. If it wasn't for the white guitar, the homework Miguel had left on the desk, and maybe the dusty fútbol peeking out from under the bed, I wouldn't have recognized this as mi hijo's room.

'What happened to the skateboard we got him for Christmas? Or the —hm.' I tried to recall what we got Miguel for his birthday with growing horror. 'We...we did get him something, right?"

I groaned, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Usually Miguel, Luisa, and I would go to the market, and let Miguel pick out what he wanted for his birthday. It was always a fun family outing, and I suspected part of the reason Miguel liked the tradition so much was because it meant he got to eat a near-limitless amount of treats without his cousins stealing them from him.

"But did we...surely we must have..." I muttered to myself, pacing back and forth. However, no matter how hard I tried, all I could remember was the trip over a year ago now, from when Miguel had turned eleven and he'd picked out a couple fancy outfits, which I couldn't recall him ever wearing.

'Unless he snuck to the plaza wearing them.' I grimaced, realizing in retrospect that those shirts were almost the exact same style of those worn by the mariachis. 'We really do need to pay better attention to what Miguel does. This is all such a *mess*.'

I searched through Miguel's wardrobe for a change of clothes, wondering how on earth one went about apologizing for forgetting their son's birthday when it had happened over a *month* ago. 'Maybe that new guitar will have to come sooner rather than later.' I thought, walking back to the bathroom. I could hear the shower running, so I slipped the door open a crack, setting down the clothes, when I paused at the sight of a foto on the sink ledge.

Frowning, I stared at it for a moment, recognizing it as the one put on the ofrenda for Mamá Imelda each year. 'But when on earth did Miguel get it? I took that photo from Miguel myself, and put it away with the others when Día de los Muertos was done. So how—'

"Ahhh! *¡Papá!*"

I winced, having been so focused on the foto that I hadn't noticed the shower turning off. "Lo siento, Mijo." I struggled not to laugh at mi hijo shielding his body with the shower curtain, like I hadn't been the one to change his dirty diapers. "Just head back to Mamá's and my room when you're done, okay? I'm going to bring up some food."

Miguel nodded vigorously, insisting rather fervently that I leave. Rolling my eyes, I set the clothes down, shutting the door behind me. 'Tweens,' I smirked wryly, though it didn't last long when I remembered what I had found. I eyed the door for a moment longer, before heading downstairs, making my way to the closet next to the living room. It didn't take much work to unearth the box with the framed fotos in it, and I was soon holding the one with Mamá Imelda and Coco, along with the headless músico.

Miguel had taken the scrap of Papá Héctor's head and hidden it somewhere before Abuela could dispose of it, along with the notes Mamá Coco kept. 'Probably the best move he's made recently.' I stared at the foto in bewilderment. 'The foto Miguel has couldn't be a copy, it looked too old for that. And it had the exact same tear, so how...'

Pursing my lips, I put everything back where it came from, deciding to question Miguel on how the foto was duplicated over breakfast. Heading to the kitchen, I opened up the fridge, surprised to see two

plates of chilaquiles left over from breakfast. Smiling, and reminding myself mentally to thank mi amor for the plates, I added forks and a couple of pan dulces to each plate before heading back upstairs. I was glad I'd had the foresight to leave the glasses when cleaning up this morning, because I didn't plan on us joining family meals until Miguel and Abuela reconciled.

'*If* they ever reconcile, that is.' I corrected myself mentally, knowing that it all depended on Miguel being willing to trust Abuela again, and more importantly, Mamá changing her ways. 'One thing at a time though.' I reminded myself, opening the door to Luisa's and my room.

'One thing at a time.'

Miguel's POV

I eyed the outfit mi papá had left me, before grudgingly putting it on. 'I guess it's not really his fault for not knowing which clothes I like better, but still.' I rubbed the bottom of the shirt between my fingers and thumb, scrunching up my nose. 'I've literally never willingly worn this. This is the shirt Mamá makes me wear whenever I'm getting my picture taken, and it feels so...stiff. And these pants...' I huffed, wishing mi papá had thought to bring me a belt as well. 'But they'll work, I guess. They're still better than the shirt.'

Grumbling to myself, I put the clothes on, making sure to slide the foto gently into my new jeans. I grabbed my old clothes, and walked to my room, throwing them in the hamper. Pausing, I pursed my lips, before pulling out a pair of more comfortable clothes with a shrug. 'Papá probably won't care if I don't wear the ones he picked out. And if he does, I can just explain—'

"Miguel! MIGUEL!"

I jolted, then raced out of my room with one arm still out of my sleeve. "Papá?! What are you—"

"Miguel!" Papá turned away from the empty bathroom, his shoulders slumping as he swore under his breath, speed walking

over to me. "I *told you* to go my bedroom, not—"

"I was just putting the dirty clothes in the hamper!"I protested, rearranging my shirt and jeans now that I knew nothing was wrong. "I was going to go to your room after."

Mi papá frowned, giving me a long look. "Sí, sí, I understand. Let's just—go back to the room. I brought up some breakfast for us, I bet you're hungry." He said, leading the way back to his and Mamá's room.

I didn't bother to tell him that no, I wasn't really all that hungry, at least not when he still seemed upset at thinking I had "left". I brightened a bit at the pan dulce on the plates, even if it was next to chilaquiles. Just the smell of the fried tortilla was bothering me in the few seconds we'd been in the room, but I didn't say anything, hoping it would get better with time.

I dragged the chair from the desk over to the small stool mi papá was already sitting on, figuring that I should probably at least avoid getting crumbs on the bed. Grabbing the plate, I balanced it on my lap like Papá was doing, immediately taking a bite of the pan dulce. I could tell it was fresh, and while it wasn't as sweet as the churros last night, it made me feel warm in the way only home cooked food could.

'I guess I was hungrier than I realized,' I thought, taking another bite of the sweet bread. 'I kind of wish I had milk, but water is okay too, I guess.' I mentally shrugged, taking a sip from my glass after finishing the first pastry. I was already getting full, which was weird, because usually I could eat two or three pan dulces just fine. I took a closer look at the second pastry, staring at the seashell-like design. 'But these are bigger than Abuela usually makes them, so maybe it's not that strange.'

I was reaching for the second one, when mi papá cleared his throat. I glanced up, pausing when I noticed him eyeing my plate. "You should have some chilaquiles first, Mijo." Mi papá said, motioning to the food I'd purposely been ignoring.

Frowning, I glared down at the offensive pile, picking up my fork

and jabbing at it half-heartedly a couple of times. Just thinking about putting it in my mouth made me want to gag, though I wasn't sure why. I'd eaten chilaquiles plenty of times before, and though they weren't as good as burritos, I still liked them alright. Yet now, it was like my stomach was a beehive, and the chilaquiles were a hose threatening to send all the bees buzzing around.

But that was weird too, and I didn't want Papá thinking we needed to go to the hospital, so instead I asked, "do I have to? I really just want the pan dulce."

Mi papá raised his eyebrow, which was really all the answer I needed. Still, he added, "sí, Mijo. It's not good for you to eat only desserts."

I watched him finish all of his chilaquiles, before moving on to his pan dulce, unamused. 'I wish Dante were here right now, instead of hanging out with Pepita.' I thought, setting my plate back on the bedside table. 'He would happily eat the chilaquiles, and then we could split the pan dulce.'

Instead, I was stuck sipping my water, forcing myself not to roll my eyes as mi papá went on and on about how good the chilaquiles were, and how the spicy salsa tasted just right with the cheese and eggs. 'Does he think I'm five? I mean, the manhandling was one thing, but this? It's literally the same thing Tío Berto does to get Manny and Benny to try new foods.'

Something about my deadpan must have given away that mi papá's tactic wasn't working, because the smile and cheery performance were dropped with a sigh. "Miguel, why aren't you eating the chilaquiles, hmm? I know they're not your favorite, but you used to eat almost *anything* if it meant you could have pan dulce."

I stared at my hands, rubbing my thumb over my calloused fingertips. "They just...they're making me nauseous." I admitted under my breath, picking at a particularly tough layer of skin.

Mi papá grabbed my hands, and I looked up, surprised to see he had a warm smile on his face. "Thank you for telling me, Mijo. Is there anything you can think of that wouldn't hurt your stomach?

Something a little more nutritious?"

I blinked.

"Does milk count?"

Mi papá nodded, his smile growing. "I'll get you some milk, and you can have it with your second pan dulce. Does that sound good?"

I nodded. "I can just go down with you, and eat it down there." I suggested, figuring it would save him a trip. That, and it was getting weird having mi papá fetching my food and stuff for me.

"Sure, Mijo." He said, grabbing his plate. I followed him out of the room with my own plate, down to the kitchen, and was eating my pan dulce with milk within a few minutes while Papá ate my chilaquiles.

I ate about half of the second one, before I was too full to eat another bite. I glanced at mi papá, feeling kind of weird sitting in the empty kitchen. It was strange to be sitting at home, knowing that while I was here, the rest of my class was learning about the atmosphere in science or something right now. 'Well, actually—' I glanced at the clock. 'They're probably stuck multiplying equations.'

"Are you done, Miguel?"

I nodded, looking back at mi papá. He frowned for a second, and I flinched, wondering if I was going to have the same problem I had with Abuela with mi papá. Instead of reacting negatively, though, he simply set the plate aside for later, adding our used dishes to the sink before sitting back down.

I tapped my fingers against my thigh, waiting for him to say something. I didn't really want to go to school now, but I also didn't want to go to the workshop or talk about Día de los Muertos, if possible, so my options for what to do now were rather limited.

"..."

"..."

I puffed my cheeks up, glancing at the clock again. It had been five minutes, and the silence was starting to get to me, so I said, "it looks nice outside."

Mi papá blinked, looking out the window. "Yes, it does. We could maybe go to the plaza, if you—"

I nodded vigorously, only stopping when I thought there was a serious risk of the pan dulce and leche making a reappearance. "Sí, I'll go get my shoes!" I raced to the door, mi papá laughing as he followed after me.

"Slow down, Mijo!" He put on his boots, opening the front door. I couldn't help practically bouncing as we headed down the street, and I greeted all the sellers out and about with a grin and a wave. There were fewer than there were for Día de los Muertos, but still many small stalls selling food and souvenirs for tourists attracted to Santa Cecilia because of...**him.**

Shoving that thought out of my mind, I perked up at the sound of music being played not far off. I glanced at mi papá, but instead of frowning and insisting we go somewhere quieter, he was smiling down at me, leading us straight to the sound of guitars. I only hesitated for a second, before smiling back, glad to be able to show mi papá one of the places I spent many of my free hours.

"Ay, Miguel! What are you doing out of school?! You should—"

Martín froze mid pat, finally noticing mi papá. "Who is this, Miguel?" He asked, his hand turning into a protective weight on my shoulder.

Mi papá scowled, glaring at Martín's hand. "I think I should be asking you that, considering you are the strange man touching my —"

"Woah, it's okay!" I stepped between the two angry men, glancing rapidly between them both. "Papá, this is Martín—he's the one who helped me learn how to read sheet music, and let me borrow his guitar sometimes. Martín, this is my papá," I said, trying to show each man that neither one was a threat.

"Ah, lo siento, Señor." Martín held out his hand, his expression a bit less threatening than it was before. "Martín Hernandez. You have to understand, to see Miguel out of school, and with a man in the plaza no less, while there's the whole music ban..." he trailed off with a shrug, to which mi papá nodded, grabbing Martín's hand.

"Enrique Rivera." I watched on as they both squeezed each other's hand for a moment, before letting go as if they had burned each other. "And you understand, I'm sure, how it must look for me to see *mi hijo being...touched*, by a strange man." Mi papá grinned, though it didn't look all that friendly.

"Why, of course!" Martín bared his own teeth, and I couldn't help but be reminded of Pepita's maw. "You're Miguel's father! And because of that, I'm sure you are aware of every time that Miguel has come here in the past few months, and taken measures to ensure he is safe from the less...savory people, in town." The grin got a little wider, and if I didn't know Martín, I would probably be running away by now. "As a father should, of course. *As is his job*."

Mi papá flinched back as if he had been physically slapped, before straightening even further. "You have the *nerve*—"

"Hey!" I yelled, my voice loud enough to attract the attention of the few vendors in the area who weren't already watching the argument with open curiosity. I faltered when both mi papá and Martín immediately looked at me, their eyes harder than I expected. Still, I clenched my fists by my side, refusing to cower under their gazes.

"Martín, Papá has been...it's been better, the last few days. He's...yeah." I stopped, not quite sure how to explain everything that had happened within one sentence. I turned to mi papá. "Papá, Martín helped make sure I knew which parts of town to avoid, and made sure I went home before it got dark out."

My words seemed to help, as both Martín and Papá, while not looking happy, seemed to at least grudgingly accept one another. 'Sure, they're still eyeing each other like a lion and tiger would, but it could be worse.'

Mi papá pulled out his wallet, taking out a few 20 pesos bills.

"Miguel, how about you go get a couple of churros, while Martín and I talk for a bit." He said, nodding his head to the vendor several yards away.

I looked between the long line and the money. I wasn't all that hungry, as we'd practically just eaten, but I was also smart enough to realize that mi papá wasn't asking. Or at least, I didn't think he'd be happy if I said no.

'That, and I will probably be sent out of hearing range no matter what I say so they can talk.' I realized, taking the money. 'At least this way I get churros out of it, and don't have to listen to their fighting.'

I walked away, sending one last glance behind me as I joined the line. 'I really hope they don't end up literally fighting. Papá would never let me go to the plaza *again*.'

Hard Truths

I'm super stressed about school rn, so I did the responsible thing and decided to get another chapter out lol. Hope you enjoy and that my grades do not suffer!

Enrique's POV

I turned to fully face Martín, noticing with a distant sort of pleasure that I was a few inches taller than him. "How did you and Miguel meet?"

Martín's scowl deepened. "That depends—" he said, his large black brows furrowing as he glared at me. "How did Miguel get that cut on his face?"

I paused. "That...it's complicated." I muttered, running my hand down my face. "It's not going to happen again, though. I'm making sure of it."

Martín scoffed. "What, and I'm supposed to believe that? No offense, but from the stories I've heard from Miguel, and the way he's always running around here on his own, I'm not keen on believing you've suddenly had a miraculous change of heart." He shook his head, muttering a litany of curses under his breath.

I pursed my lips, resisting the urge to just grab the man by the front of his gaudy Mariachi jacket and shake him until he told me everything. Unfortunately, I got the sense that not only would that not work, but that I'd earned this man's ire for completely legitimate reasons. 'And at this point, I'm not entirely sure which one of those points makes me angrier.'

So instead, I stared at the man across from me, an idea scratching at the back of my brain. "You...you know things. About Miguel." I waited for Martín to give me a sharp nod, before continuing. "What is it going to take for me to get answers?"

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, because Martín's gaze went from wary to downright hateful. "Dios mio, what kind of boludo do you think I am?! I'm not going to screw over the kid just so you can *punish him*. I—"

"Wait, please!" I grabbed his arm as he went to storm off, stepping in front of him. "I didn't mean it like that. Quite frankly, I don't give a flying alebrije about what music stuff he's gotten into right now, I just—he's getting hurt at school, and having nightmares, and disappearing into thin air, and I'm *worried*."

Martín had stopped trying to escape from my grip, and was back to glaring at me. "I know you hate me, and that's—I get that." I breathed harshly out my nose, staring straight into Martín's hard brown eyes. "But I'm trying to keep Miguel safe, and to help him, but Miguel won't talk to me! Please, I'm not asking for anything that would get him in trouble, I just want to know how to *protect him*."

Martín inspected my face, his expression eerily blank as he read my own. I tried to make myself seem as earnest as possible, to show that I just wanted to be there for Mijo. I wasn't sure if it was working, until Martín sighed, shaking my hand off of him.

"I've known Miguel for around three years now." Martín said, watching Miguel move forward a few inches in line. "At first, it was just a bruise here and there, the kind you'd expect from a young, active boy. But when he came to the plaza a few months later, his hands too scraped up to hold a pencil..." Martín clenched his jaw, and I couldn't help scowling as I imagined what must have happened for his hands to have been hurt so badly.

"I helped bandage him up, and tried to convince him to tell you and your wife, or a teacher, but he wouldn't have it. Just said he couldn't."

I shook my head, trying to make sense of the story. "Why hide it from us? We talked with him when he was a kid about coming to us if *anything* like this happened, and he understood that if he talked about it with us, we would help and make sure it stopped."

Martín frowned, shifting on his feet.

I squinted at him, trying to understand why he looked so uncomfortable—

I blinked.

"You know who it is."

Martín froze, which was really all the confirmation I needed.

"If you *knew*, why didn't you—"

Martín turned back to me, the scowl once more on his face. "Because Miguel was trying to protect *you*." He hissed, poking my chest. "And from what I knew of you, I wasn't sure if Miguel was right when he told me you couldn't do anything to help, or if it was a matter of you being *unwilling* to do what it took to keep your own son *safe*."

I pushed his hand away, leaning down until we were face to face. "Those kids could be the president's sons, for all I care. If I need to go down to the school myself to make sure they'll never hurt mi hijo again, then that's what I'll do." I was close enough now that I could feel Martín's breath on my face. "But I can't do that, if I don't know who Miguel thinks he's protecting me from!"

I was breathing heavily at this point, my lips twitching as I fought the urge to scream. Martín stared at me for a moment, before taking a purposeful step back, never breaking eye contact. We stood like that for so long, that I could see Mijo moving up several feet in line out of the corner of my vision. I knew that I couldn't be the one to back down though, not if I wanted answers.

It took until the tension was mostly gone for Martín to turn towards Miguel, who was almost to the front of the line at this point.

"His name's Jake Ramírez. Him and his two thugs are who have been beating on Miguel."

I squinted at the man, my mind rapidly trying to figure out why I recognized that name, before it came to me. 'Ramírez. His father's the one who provides the leather we use to make our shoes. He's the only large distributor of leather in town, so he—'

I cursed, realizing Miguel had probably made the same connections I had. Or rather, this "Jake" probably made them for him, threatening that he'd get his dad to stop supplying to the Riveras if he snitched.

Martín nodded, probably following my train of thought. "The kid hates making shoes, but he understood that it was something you guys love." He shrugged halfheartedly, the look on his face half sympathy, half pity. "That, and he didn't want to be the reason your entire family lost their jobs and had to live on the streets."

I opened my mouth to refute that part, but Martín merely held his hands up. "His words, not mine." He explained with a sigh, scratching his head. "But maybe you can convince him."

I nodded, watching as Miguel fidgeted in place, now only one person away from ordering. "I'll talk it over with him, explain that we can get our leather from the next town over." I turned back to Martín, mentally reevaluating him after this little..."conversation".

It pained me to do it, but I opened my mouth again. "Thank you—for looking out for Miguel." I said, holding out my hand. "I wasn't there for him like I should have been, but you were, and I—I don't know what would have happened to him, if you hadn't been there for him."

Again, Martín stared at me for a long, unnerving moment. Just when I thought I should put my hand down, he grabbed it, giving it a firm shake. "He's a good kid, but trouble follows him like bees to honey." He grinned wryly, watching as Miguel accepted three churros with a grin, and started walking back over. "He could use more people in his corner."

I hummed in agreement as Miguel returned, his lips already covered in sugar. "I got one for each of us!" He proudly proclaimed, holding a churro out first to Martín and then to me. He'd already taken a couple bites out of his own, probably while he was waiting for the other two to come out.

"Ay, Mijo, I couldn't! I'm way too full." I said, patting my stomach. "You can have mine." I smiled down at him, ruffling his hair gently,

making sure to avoid where I knew his head wound was.

Miguel squinted at me, before shrugging, apparently accepting my excuse. It was sweet of him to share, but I was just glad he was eating more food for a change.

'At least he had some milk this morning,' I comforted myself as Martín and Miguel ate the churros. 'I'm going to have to work on getting him to eat more regular food eventually, but maybe it will be easier once he gets his appetite back. Until then, I don't really want to risk him starving himself just because I'm limiting what he can eat.'

'But there's got to be a reason why the other food is making him nauseous. Maybe the head wound? It could be a concussion.' I eyed Miguel's head again, wishing I could just read his mind to figure out what was wrong.

'One thing at a time.' I reminded myself as we headed into the plaza square, a place I'd rarely dared to go for fear of mi mamá finding out. Music was always playing here, even into the early hours of the morning, and I imagined that this is where Miguel must have originally met Martín.

I glanced at Miguel, expecting him to look happy to be surrounded by músicos, but if anything he looked...angry? I followed his gaze to the statue in the middle of the plaza, the one tourists from around the world came to see. 'But...isn't that de la Cruz? The same guy Miguel was practically idolizing a couple weeks ago? I mean, he had a *shrine*—'

"Chamaco, you okay?"

Martín's hushed words brought me back to the present, to Miguel, whose hands were *shaking*. Kneeling down in front of him, I tried to catch his eyes, gently calling his name. It took a couple tries, and a strong grip on his shoulders, but he eventually focused on me.

He gave a full-body shudder, inhaling sharply. "So, uhm, what did you want to do, Papá? I could show you where Martín works, or the store that sells records, sometimes they give me old ones that don't

work well anymore to use. Oh, there's also this place that has a bunch of music cassettes that you can buy from all sorts of musicians, and I—"

"Miguel, slow down," I breathed in deeply, waiting until he mimicked my action, before continuing. "Are you okay? Why did you look at the statue like...*that*?" I asked as I stood up, not quite sure how to word how Miguel reacted.

"I...it's a long story." Miguel sighed, looking up at me through his bangs. He glanced between Martín and I, seeming conflicted about something. "Do you...do you remember the letters, from Papá Héctor?"

I blinked, my mind racing to find the connection between two things I thought were completely different matters. "I—yes, Miguel. But I understand why you hid them, so—"

Miguel shook his head, biting his lip. "Those letters are dated, Papá, from right before that—that **man**, became famous. And they have all of the songs that **he** claimed to write in them, which is impossible, unless the dates are wrong or—"

"—Cruz is a thief." Martín finished, his eyes hardening as he stared at the old statue. He turned back to Miguel after a moment, his lips pursed. "Chamaco, are you—how sure are you that those letters are legit? I trust you, of course—" he hurried to add when Miguel slumped at his words—"but if you're right, this is a very big deal. A lot of people will be shocked, to say the least, and some will be angry."

I frowned, realizing where Martín was going with this. If people found out their idol wasn't all he was cracked up to be, who knew what the people who profited off of Cruz's fame would do to keep making money. "Mijo, you haven't told anyone else this, right?"

Miguel shook his head, but his mouth puffed up the way it always did when he lied. "*Miguel*, this is *serious*." I grabbed his arms again, trying to make him see sense. "If anyone finds out you have those letters before they've been authenticated, it could cause major problems. People could try to steal them, or even kidnap you, or—"

"*Papá,*" Miguel hissed, shaking my arms away. "I kind of already figured that out the hard way, thanks."

Miguel's eyes widened.

"What do you mean—"

"You know, I'm feeling kind of cold—"

"Miguel Enrique Rivera, you will tell me—"

"— another jacket, would be really nice, actually—"

"MIGUEL."

Mijo's mouth slammed shut, and he tensed, his shoulders practically reaching his ears. I was so angry, so furious about not being able to *do* anything. Mi hijo was threatened, maybe even hurt, again and again and *again*, and I didn't want to be kept in the dark any longer. No, I *refused* to be kept in the dark anymore.

I opened my mouth to verbalize my rage, but froze as a horrible voice whispered in my head. 'And now you can demand answers out of him, just like your mamá did. After all, *like mother, like son.'*

The horrible words made me reevaluate what I was doing. It was a struggle to unclench my fists, my nails leaving crescent moons in my palms. Taking in a ragged breath, I stepped forward, telegraphing my motions as much as possible as I pulled Miguel into a hug.

"Mijo, I'm—I'm sorry," I whispered, hoping he could hear me over all of the music still being made in the background. I thought he probably could, by the way he brought his arms around me soon after I spoke.

"I want to keep you safe. I'm trying to show that you can trust me, and that you can come to me when you're in danger, and I—I understand, that you don't see me that way yet."

"Papá—"

"But until you *do,* I need you to—can you—"

"Papá, I'm *okay*." Miguel pulled back, staring at me with large, earnest eyes. "They—they can't get me, and no one here knows about the letters except for the familia. I *promise*."

I blinked at him, trying to make sense of his words. '"No one here"? What does he mean no one—'

I frowned, realizing what he was trying to explain. 'So no one in the land of the living knows. Or at least, that's what he thinks.' I eyed Martín out of the corner of my eye. He still looked worried, but now seemed a bit confused as well. 'But he couldn't tell Martín without explaining the whole thing, which is...yeah. I'm not even sure I believe it yet, and I've seen the glowing light and Papá Héctor.'

I nodded to Miguel, trying to convey I understood what he was saying. He nodded back, a look of relief making its way across his face. 'We could talk about this later, but for now...'

I cleared my throat, keeping my arm around Miguel's shoulders, but otherwise letting go of him.

"Martín."

The man looked at me, a single eyebrow raised. He was clearly mystified about what had just happened, and the apparent 180° shift in my tone.

"Sí?" He said, hands on his hips.

"I don't suppose you know where I could buy a guitar around here? Something good for, say, a twelve-year-old boy?"

Martín glanced at me, and then at Miguel, who was practically jumping up and down on his toes. "I think I might know a spot." He smirked, ignoring the way Miguel's eyes were almost bulging out of his face. "Any reason why you'd need one?"

I gave him a small shrug, trying to tamper down my grin. "I might know someone who deserves a late birthday gift." I admitted, holding back a wince at the guilt and the way Martín tensed. "The

kid deserves a new one, and—"

"Argh, come on already!" Miguel yelled, grabbing my hand and attempting to physically drag me away. I laughed, letting him lead me to the store where they apparently had "the coolest guitars you'll ever see, with these engravings on them and accessories and everything you could ever want!"

Martín and I watched Miguel practically race around the store, both of us holding back laughter at the sight of him flitting from one thing to the next. I told him when we entered that he could pick out a guitar and three small things to go with it, and the boy was clearly struggling to decide what to get.

'In all honesty, I'll probably end up coming back here with him again soon—he could use some of these posters or old records to decorate his room.' I thought, looking around the second-hand store. 'And maybe now that he can spend his earnings on things he'll actually enjoy, he might like working a bit better.'

Miguel began talking with the store worker, animated expressions on both of their faces as something occurred to me. 'When was the last time Miguel was that happy about anything? Has he ever looked even half that glad shining shoes or helping out en la tienda?'

I frowned, wishing I could appreciate how delighted mi hijo was without such pesky realizations. 'Being a shoemaker is a reliable job, though. Musicians, they have to go from one place to the next, struggling to make ends meet. Not to mention the danger of traveling alone, the risk of falling into the wrong crowd—'

"You know, I met Miguel when he was shining shoes in the plaza." Martín interrupted my thoughts. I glanced at him, only to find him staring at Miguel as well, who was now following the worker around the store as they talked.

"Once he found out what my outfit meant, he'd beg every time he saw me for lessons." Martín shook his head, a wry smile making its way across his face. "After a few weeks of that, I caught him trying to sneak into the bar I worked at to listen to me play. I finally

offered to teach him some stuff in exchange for free shoe shinings and staying away from the place. I figured he'd lose interest after a few lessons, once he realized how difficult and painful playing guitar can be."

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"*...and?*"

Martín raised his eyebrow. "And *what*? Clearly I was wrong." He waved his hand, though I wasn't sure if he was gesturing to Miguel, who was now watching the worker bring items in from the back room, or to the situation in general. Either way, I could see his point.

Martín sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Look, your kid? He's *gifted*. I've never seen someone take to music as quickly as he has, or met anyone who has such raw talent for the guitar. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was raised to be a musician from birth, but that obviously wasn't the case! And he—"

He cut himself off with another sigh, taking in a deep breath. He eyed me for a long moment, and though Martín was probably the same age as me at best, I suddenly felt incredibly young under his scrutiny. It was as humbling as it was nerve-wracking.

"I understand the concerns you might have; mis padres probably felt the same way you do, when I told them I wanted music to be more than just a hobby. And with the whole ban..." he trailed off, turning back to Miguel. Mijo seemed to have narrowed down his selection to five tools/add-ons, and seemed to be debating with the worker on which items to get. And still, as he was setting items aside he couldn't get, he seemed *so*—

"You need to know that Miguel will *never be happy* making shoes."

I froze, the oxygen literally sucked out of my lungs.

"Oh sure, he might pretend for your familia's sake. Might even be halfway able to convince himself, too." Martín continued with a halfhearted shrug. "But he will always regret not being able to follow his dreams. He will grow to resent being forced into a job he despises, working hours upon hours every day when he could be doing something he loves.

"Miguel is not a hateful person, though, and he *loves* his family. *Never once* has he spoken bad about you and your wife, or even his cousins or abuela, no matter how upset or miserable he felt. And I think, if he really had to choose between music or keeping his familia, he'd choose his familia."

I pictured that, for a second. Miguel growing up, making shoes alongside Rosa and Abel, having kids of his own one day. I tried to imagine what he would be like with no love of music, the man he would become if he'd never picked up a guitar. But despite only learning about his rebellion a couple weeks ago, I couldn't even fathom what Miguel would be like without that passion now.

"If you make him choose, though, just know one thing."

For the first time in our conversation, Martín completely turned his back on Miguel. I was struck by the way he was now giving me his full attention, something he hadn't done since back near the churro stall, when he thought Miguel might be in danger.

The implication was not lost on me.

Martín leaned in, until he was so close I could see specks of gold in his wild eyes. His nostrils were flared, and I had to resist the urge to back away.

"Miguel may not resent *you* for abandoning music, but he will resent *himself*. His self-hatred will grow with every pair of shoes he makes, until he is left a shell of who he was, his happiness traded for your own and everyone else's."

He held up a finger, poking it into my chest. The motion itself didn't

hurt, but the understanding of what it meant made my heart stop in its tracks.

"Know that if you force him to be a shoemaker, it will be for your *own* good. *Not his*."

I swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in my throat. Miguel called for Martín, and he said something back in a cheery tone, though what I couldn't say. I was too busy reeling from the harsh truths Martín had spelled out for me, trying to wrap my head around what he'd said.

Martín was walking away. And then he wasn't. He was turning to look at me, talking, saying, "I'm not you. I don't have the *privilege* of being Miguel's father, no matter how much I wish I did."

He shook his head, and by the small smile on his face, I could tell he was picturing what it would be like if he was Miguel's papá. It made something in me burn, and I had to restrain myself from doing something rash.

"But you should understand that I've helped him for *many years* now, as Miguel has been hurt *emotionally* and *physically*, because of your *negligence*. I've stood by and done nothing, because Miguel *insisted* that you and your wife were great parents, and that you couldn't be blamed for *any of it*."

He laughed then, something ugly and hollow. My heart was beating so loudly now, I wondered if he could hear it from where he stood a few feet away.

"So you should also know, that if I see anything else like that cut on his face again, I won't hesitate to do what it takes to *make sure he's safe*."

My body was trembling. Everything else, even Miguel, felt rather distant as I stared at Martín, rage and terror warring within me. Still I did nothing but watch as he walked away, and I thought that was it, until he called, just loud enough for me to hear:

"I'm sure you would want nothing else, as his papá."

He didn't bother to stop his stride, just making his way leisurely to Miguel. I was frozen in my spot, and could do nothing but look on as Martín and Miguel talked, their twin smiles filling me with a fear and jealousy I'd never really known before today. My muscles were twitching, aching to help me fight my way out of this situation. But there was no enemy to fight, not really. This was a situation of my own making, a spider's web I'd weaved so horribly that I trapped myself in it.

And as I stood there, my feet glued to the ground, I realized that I had to worry about losing mi hijo in more ways than one.

Soft Confrontations

I can't believe it's basically the end of September already, it's so strange. Anyways, took a break from studying for yet another exam to post this hahaha...yeah. Starting to feel the stress anywho, hope you enjoy!

Miguel's POV

"This is so awesome!" I exclaimed, having lost track of how many times I'd said those words in the past two hours. "Thank you, Papá! The guitar is amazing, and the songbooks are great, and the strap is so cool!"

Mi papá chuckled, though it seemed a little...off. He'd been acting kind of weird since he and Martín had been talking at the music store, and kept glancing between us with a strange look on his face.

'He did end up buying me five extra things instead of three though, so he's definitely not mad at me.' I considered the extra set of strings in my hand and the second songbook, the two items I thought I would have to put back. 'And he did seem to start acting a bit more normal when Martín left for work.'

I thought back to how mi papá had gotten all silent when Martín and I had done our secret handshake. 'Maybe he's just not a fan of musicians yet? I guess he hasn't really met any, and grew up hearing about how untrustworthy they are.'

I was kind of curious what Papá and Martín had talked about while I was gone, but when neither of them brought it up, I decided it was better not to mention the conversation. I knew it probably had something to do with me, but I wasn't sure how much Martín told Papá, and I didn't want to risk getting into more trouble by accidentally out myself if Martín might have covered for me. After all, there were some...incidents, that I was not at all ready to try to explain to mi papá.

'Maybe in 20 years, when we can both laugh about it, and he can't take away the guitar he just got me.' I thought, resisting the urge to pull my guitar around for the fourth time to look at it. The coloring of the guitar was nothing too flashy, simply a dark brown wood with a black neck, head, bridge, and pick guard. What made it special, though, was the marigold petals engraved up the base of the body, and the little skulls hidden in the etchings.

Mi papá asked me if I was sure I wanted this one, probably a little surprised I went the floral route. Even the store clerk, Daniel, seemed unsure why I wanted a guitar that was usually geared towards more...feminine, buyers. But I liked the reminder, both that music connected me to those a world away, and that even if no one living accepted my desire to play guitar, my dead familia did.

Keeping my hand firmly on the strap of my guitar, I looked up. "Papá, does anyone else know about...?" I trailed off, not quite sure how to mention everything that had happened today.

Mi papá pursed his lips, probably guessing at some of my concerns. "No, they don't. We can tell your mamá, but for now...perhaps it's best if you hide this guitar, along with the other one, actually." He winced, hurrying to add, "you will be able to play it eventually! I just need to discuss it with mis padres y hermanos first, okay?"

I nodded, understanding where he was coming from. I could only imagine how angry Rosa and Abel would be to know that I didn't have to obey the music ban now; but to do it in front of them, before they knew that I'd gotten mi papá's permission? That was just asking for trouble.

'Even if I do wait for Tío Berto or Tía Carmen to tell Rosa about the guitar, I'm not sure she's going to be any less furious. She's always teasingly "borrowing" my stuff, like the skateboard I got last Christmas. Although, maybe that was for my benefit, really.' I mentally winced, remembering the countless scrapes and bruises it gave me before Rosa had finally taken it away. 'I guess she could have been trying to help me. And she did hug me when I came back yesterday, so maybe it will be fine...?'

"What are you thinking about so hard, Mijo?" Mi papá ruffled my

hair, and with no hands free to stop him, I had to literally jump away to get him to stop.

"*¡Papá!*" I whined, glaring at the hair now in my eyes. Ignoring his laughter, I reached up, pushing my hair out of my face with my arm. I winced when I made contact with the bruised area of my forehead, though I was grateful that the pain on touch wasn't nearly as bad as it was on Friday.

"Mijo, are you okay?" I blinked, looking up at mi papá. He kept glancing between the now visible bruise, and the grimace on my face, his lips a tight line underneath his mustache.

"Sí, I'm good." I said, tilting my head just enough so my hair would cover the wound again. Unfortunately, the action only made mi papá frown, although I wasn't sure why—it wasn't like I was actually hiding it from him anymore, I was just covering it up so no one would have to look at it.

"On second thought, Mijo, why don't I take the guitar and accessories." Mi papá held out his hands, saying, "I can hide them in my room, and no one would dare go looking for them there unless they want to anger both tu mamá and I."

I considered his offer, before reluctantly handing over my new prized possession, along with the songbooks, strings, and clamp. I could see his logic, and I didn't want to risk losing my guitar to an angry Rosa or curious Abel just because I couldn't bear to part with it for a few days. That, and I figured it would be better for Papá not to see how I got to what remained of my former...shrine, really, which was where I was planning to hide the guitars. I'd already blocked the entrance that he could use to enter, and so only someone who could walk lightly on the tiles could get to the hideaway now.

"You can wait in the kitchen if you like, Mijo." Mi papá suggested as we stepped into the house, glancing at his watch. "We missed lunch, but maybe you could see if Mamá left us plates in the fridge."

I nodded as mi papá went upstairs, though truthfully I wasn't hungry at all after having two—

I froze at the sight of Abuela sitting alone at the table, eating a quesadilla. My heartbeat roared in my ears, and time seemed to slow as I watched her pick up a triangle, dipping it into salsa before bringing it to her mouth. Realizing she hadn't seen me yet, I took a step back—

Creak.

Abuela's head shot up, her eyes widening at the sight of me. "Mi-Miguel. I didn't—"

She cut herself off, her gaze falling to the plate in front of her. "Have you had a chance to eat yet?" Her hands spasmed, like she'd been shocked. "Not that you have to, of course, Mijo. I should leave —"

I shook my head as she made to get up, but she wasn't looking at me, so I tried to speak past the lump in my throat. "No, you—you don't have to leave."

I watched as she slowly sat back down, her knees creaking at the sudden movements. Swallowing, I made my way deeper into the kitchen, cautiously taking a seat across from her. I could tell Abuela wasn't quite sure what to do or say, something which made me feel a bit more confident, though I'd never admit it. "Why are you eating now? Didn't everyone else finish a while ago?"

Abuela's eyes flicked to me, but were back on her plate when she said, "I wasn't sure if you would be at lunch. I didn't want you to—Enrique, he said to wait—until you wanted to talk."

I thought back to what Papá had told me this morning, which already felt like a week ago. If he'd meant even half of what he said, he probably wouldn't want me in the kitchen with Abuela right now, alone. And if I called for him, he'd likely come racing down the stairs and burst into the room, ready to protect me from his own mamá.

'But is that really what you want?' I stared at Abuela, noticing how tired she looked, and the way she hadn't touched the quesadilla since she first saw me. 'What good will it do, to send her running

out of her own home when she hasn't even done anything yet?'

I reached up to my face subconsciously, rubbing the scab there. 'Well, not today at least, that is.'

Abuela must have been watching me out of the corner of her eyes, because she slumped at my motion, an action which made her seem much older than she usually did. "Mijo, I—I never should have hit you," she whispered, shaking her head. "Not when you didn't eat, or when you were protecting that—that man."

I blinked, shocked at what I was hearing. It was one thing to have mi papá apologize, but *Abuela*? It just—it wasn't done. Never had I heard her apologize to me or any of my cousins. Sure, she would express her regret with baked goods, or sometimes even some pocket change to spend at the market, but a verbal apology? That was unheard of.

"I—it's okay, Abuela," I stammered, not quite sure how to respond.

Abuela's eyebrows scrunched up as she frowned. "No, Mijo. It's not okay. I—I should never have used my position to hurt you like that, especially when I knew your parents were against such...punishments."

"But—"

"Miguel, Abuela is right."

I whipped my head around, watching as mi papá walked in with a scowl on his face. "And she shouldn't be here right now, not when I explicitly *told her*—"

"I said she should stay!" I blurted out, understanding how this must look. Mi papá glanced at me, his expression still clearly furious, but now a trace confused as well. "She offered to leave, but I—I wanted to talk to her."

Mi papá stared at me for a long moment, and I tried not to fidget under his scrutiny. I motioned for him to come closer, both to keep him from arguing with Abuela and to talk to him. He kneeled down on the ground, bringing our heads level.

He sighed, running a hand down his face, saying in a hushed whisper, "Mijo, I told you this morning I didn't want you alone with Abuela—"

"—until I was comfortable with her, sí." I eyed Abuela for a moment, who was studiously inspecting her apron, doing her best to seem as if we weren't there. "But she was eating now, in case I ate lunch with the rest of the familia. And I knew you'd come if I yelled, and she didn't seem angry." I paused, tentatively adding, "actually, she apologized. For the, uhm, chancla."

Even mi papá seemed surprised at the last bit, though I could tell he was trying to hide it behind a wall of disapproval. Still, I stared stubbornly back at him, knowing I hadn't *technically* done anything wrong. But Papá still looked doubtful, and I knew he was probably refusing to see just how sad and tired Abuela looked, so I caved in first.

"I still don't really trust her yet." I admitted in his ear. "But I knew you were coming down, and she was just *eating*." I gestured to the quesadilla, which was probably cold by now.

Papá glanced the plate, his eyes flitting from the food, to Abuela, and then back to me. He took a deep breath in through his nose, his nostrils flaring, before letting it out slowly. Using the table and my chair for leverage, he pulled himself to his feet, turning to Abuela.

"I suppose it's good that you're here. I need to talk to you about finding a new leather distributor."

Abuela's head shot up, a look of utter confusion painted across her face. "What? But Señor Ramírez has been our business partner for years! He's practically the only leather distributor in Santa Cecilia, and he—

"—has a son, who has been *physically bullying Miguel for years.*"

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, cursing Martín out in my head. 'He knew that he wasn't supposed to tell anyone else that! I explicitly told him—'

"Mijo, is that true?" Abuela's voice was soft, softer than I'd heard it in a long time. "Did you—has he been hurting you?"

I waited for mi papá to say something, but I guess he wanted verbal confirmation as well, because he remained silent. I pursed my lips, then huffed, "it's not *all* his fault—"

"—but he is the reason you didn't come to us. Isn't he, Mijo."

For some reason, that sentence alone made me angrier than almost anything else mi padre had done or neglected to do had. My eyes shot open as I glared at him, saying, "and what would you have liked me to do! Did you want me to come up to you three years ago when it started, right after you'd explained to me earlier that week that shoes are a Rivera's *life?*"

I pushed my chair back as I stood up, throwing my arms wide. "Or maybe you wanted me to tell you after you and mamá sat me down and explained to me why the other kids at school get more Christmas gifts, when I was eleven? Or—or maybe on my birthday, when you were so busy with a one-month-old Socorro that all I got that day was pan dulce from Abuela and scraped knees from Jake and his friends."

I panted, my chest heaving as I finally let go of the rage that had been building up. Mi papá had flinched back at some point, and with the look on his face, you'd have thought I punched him in the gut. And it felt good, for a split second, until it really didn't anymore.

I didn't want to hurt mi papá. Not really. After all, what was the point? It wouldn't make me feel better, at least in the long run. It wouldn't change anything that had happened, and I'd learned from Mamá Imelda the pain and misery that came from holding a grudge.

" I...I know you're trying to be better," I finally muttered, rubbing my arm. "And I can see that you are. But that doesn't change the fact that, for *years*, all anyone would ask me was, 'how was shoe-shining, Mijo?' Or, 'what kind of shoe do you want to make one day?'"

Papá *and* Abuela winced at that, which was some consolation. But it also made what I had to say next all the more hard. "I—I'm glad that I won't have to deal with Jake anymore. But you can't blame me for not being sure if you would do anything, if I did tell you. And I didn't want to—to know that—" my voice cracked, and I couldn't swallow the lump in my throat this time as mi papá stepped forward, pulling me into a hug.

"I don't blame you, Mijo. I *never* blamed you for being bullied, and I'm sorry that what I said made you think I did." His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, holding me close to his shirt. I took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to stop myself from ruining this shirt with my tears as well.

After a moment, he pulled back, squatting on his knees in front of me. "And I'm sorry, too, for not making it clear that you are, and will *always be*, more important than some shoes." He shook his head, his eyebrows furrowing as he said, "the whole point of the business *is* familia. The shop wouldn't have even existed if Mamá Imelda had not banded together with her brothers to make it happen!"

Sniffling, I smirked a bit at the idea of Mamá Imelda working in the shop while Tíos Oscar and Felipe made dinner for everyone. "I...I get what you're saying, Papá." I said, reaching in for one last squeeze before letting go of him.

"Tu papá is right, Miguel," Abuela chimed in as I sat back down, giving me a warm smile. "Familia has, and always will come first." She turned to Papá then, saying, "I'll look into finding someone in the town over. If I remember correctly, I went to school with someone who might be able to get us a good deal, if we're willing to go and get the leather once every month or so."

Mi papá nodded, and we sat in silence for a minute or so, none of us quite sure what to say. Finally, just when the lack of speaking was beginning to get awkward, Abuela asked in a hesitant voice, "Mijo, the...the guitar, that you mentioned stealing—"

I shrunk in my seat, and Abuela rushed to hold up her hands. "I'm not—I'm still upset, because you shouldn't have stolen it. But, surely

someone is looking for it, sí?"

I froze, realizing what she was saying. Honestly, it was a miracle no one had come to our house yet demanding it back, considering I ran through half of town with it after Día de los Muertos. 'But I don't want to give it back.' I tried not to scowl at the idea of it going back over **Cruz**'s grave. 'It's not his, and he doesn't deserve to have something back that he stole in the first place after murdering Papá Héctor!'

But I couldn't explain that without explaining a lot of other stuff, so I looked up at mi papá, saying, "he stole that, too. It doesn't deserve to be in that—that ***thief***'s, monument."

Papá frowned, and Abuela glanced between the two of us. "Mijo, what are you—did Ernesto de la Cruz *steal* that guitar?"

I blinked, surprised Abuela remembered his name. "Sí, he took it from Papá Héctor, after—"

I cut myself off, realizing that Abuela looked disgruntled at just mentioning Papá Héctor's name; that, and I realized I had no good way of explaining what I knew without telling her more than I really wanted to right now. Mi papá squinted at me, opening his mouth to say something—

"Maybe he should have taken it sooner, before Héctor went and left his familia."

Mi papá's mouth slammed shut. My head turned slowly of its own accord to Abuela, who was still muttering about no good músico's under her breath. I couldn't really make out what she was saying through the blood rushing through my ears, anyways, and I didn't care to hear any more insults.

Before, my anger was like lava bursting through my chest, a burning need to let all of the feelings I'd kept inside of me out. My rage now, though...I'd never felt anything like this before in my life. Not when Jake was bullying me, or when mis padres forgot me, or when I first found out what happened to Papá Héctor. It was like someone had stuffed fire ants under my skin, and they were

crawling and stinging along every centimeter of my body.

It took every bit of will power in me to open my mouth and not instantly start yelling. My own voice sounded strangely distant as I said:

"Papá Héctor gave up *everything for his familia*. He sent letters, and money, and—"

"He *abandoned*—"

"He *tried to come back*."

"And how do you know that?! How do you know that blasted músico didn't give up on Mamá Coco—

"Because he was *murdered*! He was *poisoned* for trying to come back, by the same ***diablo*** that stole his guitar, his music, and—"

Abuela scoffed.

"And you believed him when he said this? How do you know he wasn't—"

*"Because it was **Cruz** who told me, right before **he** tried to kill me too!"*

Corn With a Side of Anxiety

Miguel's POV

You could have heard a shoelace hit the floor in the silence that followed, if not for the sounds coming from outside that had been background noise until now.

'That was not what I meant to say.'

I guess I couldn't handle two emotions at once, because my anger had been completely replaced by panic as soon as the words left my mouth. I could actually see the resemblance between Abuela and Papá, now that they were both gaping at me with wide, horror-filled eyes.

'I really need to get a better grip on that whole brain-mouth filter thing. Preferably before I end up grounded for life.'

I patted my chest with an awkward chuckle, scooching my chair back again. "Pero, I'm okay! Pepita saved me, and I made it back home, safe and sound!"

I held out my arms wide to my side, hoping the action would distract them as I slowly backed away. "Anyways, I need to go do...something."

"*Mijo*—"

I bolted away, making a split second decision to race up to my room rather than outside. I almost ran straight into Abel, who was coming out of the bathroom, but side-stepped quickly enough that I just missed him. Unfortunately, it sounded like mi papá was not quite as fortunate, if the crashing and cries of pain I heard as I slammed my door shut were anything to go by.

'Think, think, think!' I looked around my room, trying to find

anything that could buy me time. My door didn't have a lock, and I didn't have anything to block it with besides my chair, and I didn't have time, and—and—

I pulled the foto from my pocket at the sound of footsteps getting closer to my door. 'I...I didn't exactly *agree* to not going back, at least.' I winced, knowing mi papá wouldn't see it that way, but the guilt didn't stop me from blurting out, "I wish to be with Mamá Imelda."

The gold light didn't faze me anymore, and I only had a split second to see mi papá's hurt expression, before the brightness became too much for me to make out anything. I felt bad about leaving him, but I couldn't...I couldn't *talk* about it yet. I needed—I needed someone who would understand. Someone who I didn't need to explain everything to, because they were there.

The light faded, and when it fully disappeared, I found myself back by Mamá Imelda's workstation, in almost the exact same place I'd left a couple days ago. It was almost like I had never left, except for the fact that the room was quite a bit noisier now. Well, that, and it had a lot more skeletons, too.

"Ay, Mijo! Back already? I would have thought—oomph!"

I barreled into Papá Héctor so hard, we probably would have tumbled to the ground if he wasn't already sitting at a desk. As it was, the lower half of his legs fell off at my push, leaving only his femurs behind. Realizing my mistake, I immediately let go, rushing to pick up his bones.

"I-I'm sorry, I completely forgot—"

"Chamaco, it's okay, really." Papá Héctor took the bones from my hands, putting them back into place. He flexed his legs up and down, saying, "see? Good as new!"

I must have looked doubtful, because Mamá Imelda chimed in, "I wouldn't worry too much, considering the idioto keeps taking off his legs and *losing them*."

"Hey, that only happened once! And it's not *my* fault I have restless leg syndrome," Papá Héctor huffed, crossing his arms.

Mamá Imelda raised a single brow. "Perhaps, but it is your fault for taking them off before bed in the first place!" She rolled her eyes, though I could tell by her small smile that she found the whole thing amusing.

"But it helps me sleep better." Papá Héctor pouted, turning back to me. Immediately, his expression brightened, and he hopped off the desk. "Come, Chamaco, let's let them work in peace—"

"*Héctor*, this was supposed to be me teaching you how to make shoes." Mamá Imelda glared at Papá Héctor, who rubbed his arm, looking up at her through his fringe. Her stern look lasted a few seconds longer, before she sighed, standing up.

She walked over to Papá Héctor, who positively glowed when she pecked him on the cheek, saying, "make sure he's had lunch, and don't wander off too far! It would be best if as few people as possible know he's here, sí?"

"Sí, of course!" He agreed, draping his arm over my shoulder. "Food, music lesson, quick trip to plaza, showing him his room—"

"Héctor."

"Fine, fine, no plaza." He chuckled, tipping his hat to his wife as he walked backwards out of the factory. "Hasta luego, mi amor."

I followed him out of the room, waving back in response to the mix of goodbyes. 'I can't believe that just happened.' I stared at Papá Héctor, wondering if he could teach me that trick. Surely knowing how to get out of making shoes would be more valuable than anything he could teach me about music!

'Well, maybe not anything...' I reconsidered, remembering just how many songs Papá Héctor had managed to write before he turned twenty-one. 'He would have probably made even more, if—'

I shook my head, trying to forget how I ended up here in the first place as we headed into the house. There was really no point in

dwelling on "what ifs" when he was with his family now, where he belonged.

"Ay, Chamaco," Papá Héctor interrupted my thoughts. I looked up at him, and was surprised to see his brows turned down, a small frown on his face. "You okay? You look a bit like Imelda when she gets an order for those newfangled running shoes all the newly dead want."

I blinked, trying to figure out just what Papá Héctor was talking about. Realizing he probably meant Nicce or Abibas shoes, I snorted, imagining the baffled expression on Mamá Imelda's face as the customer described what they wanted. Although really, I wasn't sure if that picture was more or less funny than Papá Héctor thinking those types of shoes were *new*.

"You are so old." I grinned, laughing even harder at Papá Héctor's offended expression. "Those shoes were popular before I was even *born*."

Papá Héctor wagged his finger at me. He pitched his voice lower and more scraggly as he said, "you know, you should show your great-great-grandpa more respect! You young folk don't know what it was like back in my day! Why—"

He must have said more, but I was too busy hugging my sides to hear, laughing so hard it was literally hurting my chest. I probably would have fallen over if I wasn't already leaning against the wall, finding it difficult to catch my breath. It didn't help that every time I was close to calming down, Papá Héctor would say something in the old-man voice again, setting us both back into roaring laughter.

The lack of oxygen soon got to me though, and I started taking deep breaths, fighting down the little chuckles that wanted to make their way out. It took a few minutes, but I eventually felt calm enough to stand back up, having slid down to the floor at some point. Seeing this, Papá Héctor held out his hand, and I grasped the little bones in my own, letting him pull me to my feet.

"I still don't get how you're so strong when you don't have any muscle." I squinted at his arm, wondering out loud, "do you have

the same strength you die with? Like, if you were paralyzed in life, are you paralyzed in death?"

Papá Héctor tilted his head. "It's...complicated. I've met skeletons who had limbs removed in life, and got them back when they came here, but if you never had a limb in the first place, that's not always the case." He shrugged in a 'what can you do' manner, adding, "magic is weird."

I nodded in agreement, staring at my finger and marveling at the way there was no bone showing despite my being in la Tierra de los Muertos. "I'm just glad that I can stay here now without the whole time limit, skeleton thing." I replied, happy that I no longer had to worry about getting stuck here permanently.

"Sí, Chamaco. Though, I do have to ask—" he opened the fridge, pulling out corn on the cob and what looked like roasted chunks of sweet potato. "Is there a specific reason you came back here today?"

I sat down at the table as Papá Héctor made me a plate. "I just...they were going to ask questions. About—about what happened." I muttered, pulling my legs up so I could put my chin on my knees. "And I didn't—"

Inhaling sharply through my nose, I squeezed my eyes shut tight, wishing that I could skip ahead a year, to when all of this would be ancient history. It would all be so much *easier* if I could just have someone else explain. I briefly considered taking Papá Héctor back with me, though something told me that wouldn't work, considering that wasn't how he got to the Land of the Living the first time.

"I know it's hard, Chamaco." Papá Héctor slid the warmed plate in front of me, gently ruffling my hair before sitting down too. "But sometimes talking about it does help, even though it hurts to bring up those memories."

I pursed my lips, wishing it was as easy as he made it sound. But I didn't want to argue over it, and the food didn't smell half bad, so I picked up my fork, stabbing at the orange cubes. Taking a small bite, I relaxed when the sweet taste covered my tongue, happily surprised to find another food that didn't make me want to vomit.

I ate in silence for a few minutes, before setting my fork back down. Papá Héctor glanced between my plate and me, giving me a weird look. "Did you already eat lunch at home?"

I made a back and forth gesture with my hand. "I had a late breakfast, and just had a couple of churros before coming here." I explained, flashing him a grin.

Papá Héctor seemed like he was going to accept that, but then paused. "And what did you have for breakfast?"

My grin melted into something a little more hesitant.

"...milk and pan dulce?"

Papá Héctor deadpanned at me, and I got the sense that this was going to be a long conversation.

"I think we need to talk about your eating habits, Mijo."

I squinted at Papá Héctor, trying to express my annoyance with my face alone. It must have worked, because he sighed, rubbing his goatee. "When I hugged you, earlier, I couldn't help but notice that you feel even skinnier than when I first met you a couple weeks ago." He paused, then added, "and that's saying something, considering you were a beanstalk then."

I glanced back down at my plate, nudging the corn with my finger. "I'm not *that* skinny. And it's not like I don't want to eat! It's just the smells make my stomach all funny, like I have a bunch of bees buzzing around."

Papá Héctor hummed, asking "is that what happened with the taco at the library?"

I nodded, glad he seemed to understand. It wasn't like I was trying to be picky, but every time I was at home and trying to eat, my stomach would rebel. It was as annoying for me as it probably was for everyone else, really.

"And I'm guessing the sweeter foods help, sí?" Papá Héctor asked, gesturing to my plate. I paused, before nodding again, not having

really made that connection until now.

"Yeah, I guess. But it's not quite so bad, uhm, here." I motioned around the room, not quite sure how to explain that even with everything that happened a couple weeks ago, this place still felt safer than home did. "I thought it was because I was tired, but even sleeping didn't really make it go away."

Papá Héctor took a deep breath, which I thought was kind of strange, considering he didn't actually need to breathe. "I think you may be having trouble eating because you're anxious, Mijo." I looked up, blinking at the grimace on Papá Héctor's face. "It happens sometimes, when people don't feel...comfortable, in their situation. It's probably why you're gravitating towards sweeter foods, because the sugar in them makes you feel calmer."

Now it was my turn to deadpan. "So, what, it's *my* fault the food makes me sick? Because my head is messed up—"

"*No*, Miguel." Papá Héctor shook his head back and forth so quickly, I was worried it was going to come off. "Nothing about this is your fault, and it doesn't make you *messed up*, or anything like that!"

"But it's not normal! And if I can't fix it, then I'll never be able to eat regular food again, and Papá and Abuela will be upset, and—"

"*Mijo, cálmate*." Papá Héctor said softly, placing his hand on my arm. "It will get better, with time. I'm sure that right now, with everything that's happened, you're feeling more anxious than your body knows how to handle. It will probably get better soon, and you can gradually start eating more and more foods."

I swallowed.

"And—and if it doesn't get better?"

Papá Héctor processed the question for a moment.

"Well, I've heard the food Rosita makes is *much* better than the food Elena does, so I'm sure we can work out an arrangement."

I gaped for a second, before snorting. "I'm sure Abuela will *love* that.

She wasn't happy with me when I was just eating less of her cooking—imagine how mad she'll be when I stop eating any of it!"

Papá Héctor huffed, crossing his arms. "That woman hit both of us with her chancla—quite frankly, I'm okay with ruffling her feathers up a bit."

I opened my mouth to defend her, before remembering why I was here in the first place. "She's so—Agh!" I screamed, at a loss of words for how to properly display my anger. "She's the whole reason I came here again in the first place!"

Papá Héctor's expression darkened, and he leaned forward. "Did she hurt you again? What happened? Are you bleeding any—"

"No, Papá Héctor, nothing like that." I dismissed his concerns with a roll of my eyes. "I mentioned to her and Papá that—that **he** stole your guitar, and she made a snide comment about wishing **he**'d stolen it sooner, before you left your familia."

Papá Héctor winced. "That, uh...I see." He practically drooped, and I realized suddenly that maybe I shouldn't have told him what she said.

"It's not your fault, Papá. You tried to come back, and they just don't know that yet!" I reassured him, waving my arms around to get my point across. "And when I tried to explain what happened, she thought you were lying, and then..."

Papá Héctor glanced up, raising a brow. "And then, Mijo?"

I pursed my lips, saying in a voice a little higher than my usual one, "I kind of mentioned that it was **Ernesto** who told me, and that he tried to kill me too..."

Papá Héctor's face scrunched up. "Yikes, Chamaco. Not exactly the...softest way, to start that conversation."

I groaned. "I didn't mean to mention it at all! I was just so angry, and it—it kind of slipped out!"

He nodded in understanding, asking, "and what happened after

that? I can only imagine how worried and confused Enrique and Elena were."

I examined the fridge door, and the old magnets sticking to it. They were really rather interesting, and much more eye-catching than I had originally realized.

"*Mijo*, what happened after you told them about Ernesto?"

"I, uhm...Ikindofrantomyroomandcamehere."

"You *WHAT?!"*

"I know I should have stayed and explained! But I just didn't—"

"Mijo, you told them that this dead guy tried to *murder you*, and then disappeared into thin air! How do you think—"

"Papá knows that I came here on Día de los Muertos!" I argued, crossing my arms. "He knows that I've been coming here!"

"And did you manage to explain that the authorities took Cruz away?"

"..."

"Dios mio, Mijo—"

"I didn't think that far ahead!" I whined as Papá Héctor face-palmed so hard his head came off. "He was coming to my room, and it was the window or here, so—"

"—you panicked, and came here." Papá Héctor finished, his voice oozing exasperation as he set his head back into place. I nodded, feeling rather stupid now for leaving like I did. 'Papá is probably so worried right now. I know he didn't want me to come back here, but what was I supposed to do! It's not like there was anywhere else I could escape to that he wouldn't chase me down.'

"I just...I told Papá, without all the...dangerous, parts, that I came here on Día de los Muertos. And he didn't—I don't think he really believed me." I stared straight into Papá Héctor's warm, brown eyes.

"How am I supposed to make him believe everything else? About **Cruz**, and you? What if they all just think I'm making it up to play music? Or for attention?"

Papá Héctor stared at me for a long moment, before his face lit up, like it did at seeing Imelda again for the first time. "We could—"

Slam.

"Héctor!"

Both of us startled, our heads turning to face a disheveled Imelda. Her hair was loose, her eyes wide, and the grin on her face was so large I thought her skull might crack.

"It's Coco! She's here!"

So...bet no one saw that coming😳. Honestly, there's kind of a horrible irony to this that I'm posting this chapter the day before my grandmother's funeral I definitely never thought that would happen when I planned out Abuela's death, but I guess that's life for you sometimes.

Different Shades of Grief

Yay, another chapter...well, hope ya'll enjoy

Miguel's POV

Papá Héctor's jaw fell into his lap, and he replaced it with a loud grito. Leaping from his chair, he went over to Mamá Imelda, lifting her into the air and twirling her around. I watched all of this, as well as their excited chattering, with a silent horror. Their voices just sort of melded together, distant in comparison to my heavy breathing and burning eyes.

'Mamá Coco's...dead.'

"What was that, Mijo?"

I blinked, looking up. I didn't realize that I'd said anything. I shook my head as I stared at the skeletons across from me, not sure how to even begin to explain what I was feeling.

'I...I understand they're happy to see Mamá Coco again. And I can see Mamá Coco still, because of these powers. So why am I so upset? What does death even matter, when you can visit anyone dead or alive? For that matter, what's the point of *life?* If everyone but me died tomorrow, would I even bother to go back to the Land of the Living? And would that technically be, like, suicide? If I never intended to go back? Or—'

A weight settled on my shoulders, startling me from my spiraling thoughts. My chest hurt, and I gasped for air, the need to breathe suddenly an overwhelming sensation. I coughed, almost choking on the oxygen entering my lungs.

"Easy, Mijo. I've got you." Papá Héctor whispered, rubbing soothing circles into my back. He used his other hand to pull the chair around, kneeling in front of me. "It's okay, Chamaco. It's going to be okay."

I wanted to ask him how he knew that, when mi familia was probably planning a funeral right now, or maybe didn't even know Mamá Coco was dead yet. I wanted to shout that it was easy for him to say that it would be okay, because he gained a family member while I lost one. But above all, I wanted to believe him, to trust that it would all work out okay for once, even if I couldn't see how that was possible.

"Come here," he said, wrapping his arms around me and standing back up. Sitting down in my chair, with me on his lap now, he moved forward and backwards, his hand keeping my head close to his chest.

It was...strange. He was wearing a similar shirt to mi papá, but I couldn't hear his heart, or feel any warmth. Still, with his soothing voice in my ear, and the gentle rocking motion, I felt like I was a little kid again, being comforted while I was sick or hurt.

'I wonder if Mamá Coco had this. If she missed it, when Papá Héctor left and never came back.' For a second, I tried to picture how it would feel, to be showered in this kind of love constantly, only to one day lose it, and never find out why. 'Maybe...maybe there was a reason that Mamá Coco never mentioned Papá Héctor after Mamá Imelda died.'

'But...but she can have it again. Because he's here, and she's here, and—'
I sniffled, pulling away from Papá Héctor. "We—we need to go see Mamá Coco! She's been waiting for you for decades, you've been waiting a *century* to see her, we need to—"

"Mijo."

Papá Héctor's hands were on my cheeks, and he was giving me this look, with his eyebrows all scrunched up, and then—"it's okay to miss her, Mijo. It's good to grieve her, and the memories you had with her in the Land of the Living." He smiled, though it was sadder than any smile I'd seen on his face yet. "And when everyone else has brought her back, and explained everything, I'm going to give her the *biggest hug*, and tell her how much I *missed her*, and *loved her*. But that—"

He swallowed, and I could see his vertebrae rattle slightly. "That doesn't mean I don't mourn the little girl I never got to see again. I wish, *every day*, that I got to see her grow up, to walk her down the aisle, to be with her when Victoria and Elena were born, and—"

His voice cracked, and he paused, then whispered, "so it's okay, to miss the Coco you knew. It's...it's okay."

I nodded slowly, understanding what he was saying. Mamá Coco would probably be different now. I'd never hold her warm hand, or kiss her wrinkly cheek, or wheel her around again. But that didn't mean I couldn't create new memories with her here, and odds were, she'd probably remember me now!

Excited at the prospect of being able to talk with Mamá Coco again, and have her remember me as her bisnieto, I leapt off of Papá Héctor's lap. "Mamá Coco won't have memory problems anymore Papá!" He grinned, nodding at me. "She'll know that I'm Miguel! That's—what are we waiting for!"

I grabbed his arm, trying to drag him to the door, only for him to lose the limb entirely. Groaning, I walked back, ignoring Papá Héctor's laughter. "You know, Chamaco, you could learn to be a little more patient." He said as he reattached his arm, sliding it up through his shirt. "And she's already on her way! Mamá Imelda and everyone else left while we were talking, so she should be here in around half an hour."

I blinked, glancing around the room, only just noticing that Mamá Imelda was gone. "Whoops," I chuckled, rubbing my neck. "I guess I got a little excited." I said, giving him a lopsided shrug.

He rolled his eyes, gently ruffling my hair. "I understand, Mijo—probably more than you could ever know." He said, his eyes losing focus. "I never thought—never *dreamed* I would—"

He coughed, clearing his throat, before turning back to me. "Well, anyways, tonight is going to be a very special night! But as much as I'd like for you to be able to spend the night again, I think your family is going to want you there with them, for the...the funeral arrangements, and everything." His brows furrowed for a second,

and I could tell he didn't like mentioning the event any more than I liked thinking about it.

"Yeah, you're probably—"

I froze mid reach into my pocket, and then slapped my forehead, letting out one of the swear words mi papá had been so fond of lately.

"*Miguel*, what—"

"The picture!" I pulled the foto out from my pocket, shoving it into his face. "I used Mamá Coco to get back to the living, but if she's here now, it won't work anymore."

"Ah. That is...certainly a dilemma." He squinted at the foto, rubbing his goatee. "And you don't happen to have any other fotos of other living family members?"

I frowned, crossing my arms. "You know, this conversation is starting to sound very familiar." I couldn't help the slight upturn of my lips when Papá Héctor snorted at that, glad that at least the both of us weren't panicking.

"We'll figure it out, Chamaco. Maybe one of the neighbors has a photo you could use. Or perhaps—"

"I think I might be of some help, Miguel."

Papá Héctor and I yelped, with Papá Héctor jumping in front of me at the sudden voice. We froze a beat, before realizing it was just Tía Victoria, and relaxing. "Dios mio, Victoria, if I weren't dead already, I'd have had a heart attack!" Papá Héctor complained, clutching his chest.

I popped my head out from behind Papá Héctor, asking, "why are you here?" My cheeks heated, and I stammered, "I mean, not that you can't be here! It is your home. I just thought you'd want to pick up your mamá and all, but maybe...not...?" I trailed off, resisting the urge to cower under her heavy gaze.

For a second, I thought I'd really offended her, and that she was

genuinely upset. But then she smirked, and I realized she'd inherited more than just her stern demeanor and looks from Mamá Imelda. 'Now I kind of feel bad for Papá Julio.' I thought, watching as she pulled something from her pocket.

"As many skeletons know, those in la Tierra de los Muertos obtain things from the Land of the Living two ways." She held up two fingers with the hand she wasn't currently using. "The first, as I'm sure you're aware of, is from offerings left to us on ofrendas or our graves." She tapped the piece of paper—it looked like newspaper, maybe—to her chin. "But the second way is less common, and arguably more difficult. Do you know what it is, Miguel?"

I paused, racking my brain for ideas. I knew there had to be some other way to get stuff, otherwise Papá Héctor never would have had a foto of himself to give me. But if he never got to cross the bridge, and his foto was never on the ofrenda, then—

"Do you...do you get to take what you had with you? When you—when you die?"

Tía Victoria's smirk turned into a real grin. "Sí, Chamaco. And I just so happen to have had a foto with me when I died." She eyed me a moment longer, and then sighed, suddenly seeming much more tired. "And I think I have a way to give you credibility, so that our familia knows you are not lying."

"But—but how! Even with the light show, nobody believed—"

"This picture has a story, Miguel." She waved the photo, which she still hadn't shown me. "And I've been thinking it over for a couple of days, and I think you deserve to know. You...you're old enough to understand why Elena is so against music."

I jerked my head back, glancing at Papá Héctor for guidance, but he seemed just as confused as I did, if not more. "What do you mean, Victoria?" Papá Héctor frowned, staring at Tía Victoria. "Mamá Imelda told me nothing about—"

"Mamá Imelda doesn't know." She shook her head, her fingers clenching the piece of paper tightly for a moment. "No one does,

except for Elena. I couldn't bear to tell anyone, and I thought no one needed to know, but now..."

She seemed so lost for a moment, and I wondered what kind of memory, what *secret,* could be causing her so much pain. I moved forward to hug her, but she turned back to me at the same second, a mask of firm determination wiping away all of the previous vulnerability. She glanced at the foto one last time, before handing it over, her arm ramrod straight.

I didn't take it right away, too surprised by her sudden change in attitude to realize what was happening. I was startled from my stance when she shook her hand harshly, clearly not keen on waiting for me to jolt myself out of my confused state. I hesitated a moment longer, before reaching forward and gently taking the foto, afraid I would tear it with how old it looked. But once I saw the foto, once I understood what I was looking at, all other thoughts were wiped from my mind. If I was a skeleton, my jaw would have dropped to the floor and rolled all the way to Shantytown.

"THIS IS—"

"Sí."

"BUT SHE'S—"

"Sí."

"THEN WHY—"

"That's what I'm going to tell you, Miguel."
Tía Victoria raised her brow, but I was far too shocked to feel even the slightest bit of guilt for my outburst. "I suggest you sit down." She gestured to my chair, and I practically fell into it, only actually making it into the seat thanks to Papá Héctor's quick readjustment of the furniture's position. He seemed utterly bewildered now, and it occurred to me he probably hadn't seen the foto very clearly, or didn't know who it was. If he had, he'd have needed a seat too.

Pulling out a third chair, Tía Victoria sat down, patting the wrinkles out of her dress. She seemed so calm for a woman who had to have

been keeping the biggest secret of her life for *decades*. 'But why?' I asked myself, wishing she'd just get on with the explanation. 'None of this makes sense! What happened—'

"This story is...a long one, but I'll try to make it as quick as possible. I know you need to get back to the Land of the Living, Miguel." She finally stopped fidgeting with her dress, stretching her hands out til they were flat. "But for everything to make sense, I need to take you back to when I was around your age, sharing a room with my own little sister. And...and the nights that started it all."

Enrique's POV

'He's...he's gone.'

Spikes of pain shot through my knees as I fell to the floor, tugging at my hair until it hurt. 'He's gone *again*, and it's all my *fault*. I was so close, I almost reached him, and now he's—now he's—'

A cold sort of horror settled into my bones. 'If—if he really is in la Tierra de los Muertos, then he's there with—with that ***monster***. What if he tries to get him again? Is la familia going to be able to protect him? If—if he doesn't come back, does that mean—'

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, resisting the urge to scream. The whole room was becoming blurry, and my chest burned, and I wanted to destroy the man who *dared* to touch mi hijo, but I couldn't, because he was already *dead*, and I—I—

"Cariño? Are you okay?"

I hung my head, feeling too ashamed to face my wife. "I...I've lost him again, Luisa. He...he told me that a man tried to *murder him*, and now he's *gone*; probably in the same place where the murderer is at, too!" I shouted, my voice sounding hysterical to my own ears.

I heard Luisa gasp, and struggled to my feet. She seemed as distraught and confused as I felt, her hands clasped tightly over her mouth and eyes shining with unshed tears. I pulled her into a hug, though whether it was for her sake or mine, I wasn't sure. I wanted to say that everything would be fine, and that it all would turn out

okay, but it was all a mess. Everything from the situation with Mamá, to what happened on Día de los Muertos, to the bullies—

"Luisa," I pulled back from her, glad that I had a bit of...well, not good exactly, but news to share with her. "Miguel and I went to the plaza today. There was a musician there, Martín, and he seemed...close, with Miguel."

Luisa frowned. "Close *how*?"

"He's...he's been helping him, with the bullies, and teaching Miguel how to play the guitar." I pursed my lips, wondering if I should mention everything we talked about, before just saying, "he told me the main bully is Jake Ramírez, and that the other two boys who pick on Miguel are following his lead."

"That's great! We can call the school, and get the principal to contact his parents, and—" Luisa paused, blinking rapidly. "Wait, Ramírez. You don't mean—"

"Sí," I nodded, recognizing the dark look in her eyes. "The boy used his father's name to prevent Miguel from telling us, threatening to convince Señor Ramirez to stop doing business with us."
"That basura! I'm going to—"

"I already informed the school, and talked to Abuela about finding a new vendor." I said, relaying what I'd been doing for the past hour or so. I winced, then added, "and Miguel's new guitar is being stashed in our wardrobe."

Luisa raised a brow. "New guitar? Amor, I understand we owe him a replacement for the one Abuela destroyed, but—"

"Mi amor, what did we get Miguel for his birthday?"

She paused, her mouth slowly closing as she thought over my question. I could see her mind racing for a few seconds as she tried to recall his gift, and when she couldn't her eyes widened.
"Enrique," she said, looking up. "We didn't—"

I nodded, rubbing my forehead. "There are also a couple books, replacement strings, and a clamp in our drawers."

"I—of course." She bit her lip, and I wondered if she felt as bad about the blunder as I did. If she was trying to think back to that day, and questioning what she was doing that was so important she couldn't spare five minutes for her son. If she wished she could go back, to make it right.

"I know, mi amor." I brought her back to my chest, squeezing her tight. "I...I was the same way. Hence, the shopping spree." I snorted bitterly at the idea that I could hope to make up for years of ignorance and neglect with churros and guitars, like I was foolish enough to believe that money could solve any of this mess.

We stood there for a long time. It felt wrong to leave the room, when Miguel could return at any second. While we waited, I filled mi amor in on what little Miguel had told me about Día de los Muertos and Papá Héctor, and how I was concerned about his eating habits. She listened quietly for the most part, only interjecting when I mentioned that Miguel seemed to only want to eat sweet foods.

"Do you think it has anything to do with what happened with...with Abuela?" She asked, gripping my arm.

"I...I'm not sure," I shook my head, sighing. "The problem is I don't even know when it started! I'd—I'll have to talk to Berto, to see if he can remember when Miguel stopped eating as much." I blinked hard, trying to fend off my growing headache. "I have to ask my brother about mi hijo, because I've been paying so little attention to him, Luisa. How pathetic is that, that my brother knows my own son better than I do?"

"It's...it's not ideal, I know." Luisa's jaw clenched, and I could tell she was as upset about the situation as I was, if not more so. "But we owe it to Miguel to figure out why he can't eat, as his parents. And if that means asking even *Abuela* if she's noticed any changes, then so be it." She said, her voice as strong as steel. "We can—"
She paused at the sound of a thump, followed by a loud cry. I glanced at her for a second, before we raced out the open door, following the sound to Mamá Coco's room. We barged in, confused for a moment to find Abuela clutching Mamá Coco's hand, a tray and broken glass littering the floor.

"She...she's gone." Abuela whispered, turning to us.

'No, no, no, she can't mean—she was doing so well, remembering Papá Héctor, and telling us stories, and—'

"Mamá Coco, she's...she's *gone*."

Abuela's Secret

Another! *Slams down the publish button*

Enrique's POV

Dinner that night was a somber affair. No one really felt like eating, or talking for that matter. The only sound in the room was that of forks scraping plates, and cups thudding on the table. Even Manny and Benny seemed to sense something was wrong, and had stayed silent for the most part.

I pushed the grilled chicken around on my plate, each bite like ash in my mouth. It felt wrong to be sitting at the table with two empty spots, one never to be filled again and the other...the other unknown. I had to explain to everyone else that Miguel had disappeared again, that—that I didn't know, if he knew about Mamá Coco, or if he'd make it back for the...the funeral.

I moved to force another tasteless bite, when a bright light began to fill the room, forcing me to cover my eyes. It lasted for only a moment, and it wasn't long until I was blinking spots away, trying to see again. "Mijo!" I cried, rushing out of my chair and to mi hijo, who was holding...paper?

"What—where were you? What is that?" I asked, moving to help him empty his hands.

His fingers tightened around the papers, and I paused. "They're, uhm...they're letters." He glanced between the letters and me, before handing me one with my name on it. "They're...Mamá Coco wanted to say goodbye." He whispered just loud enough for me to hear, eyeing the table with clear trepidation.

"Mamá Coco?" I swallowed, not sure what to say. "But, Mijo, she—"

"She's with Mamá Imelda and Papá Héctor and everyone else now. I know." He shuffled back and forth on either foot, then asked,

"should I give them to la familia now?"

I blinked, wondering what to do. 'On the one hand, no one has seen Miguel in the past few hours. Unless he saw Mamá Coco dead before Abuela, then there was no way for him to know she was gone. That, and...' I glanced down at the letter in my hand, examining the way my name was written. 'This is Mamá Coco's handwriting. There's no way Miguel could have written convincing letters from her, and really, what would be the point? There would be no reason for him to—'

"What do you have there, Miguel? And where have you been?" Rosa interrupted my train of thought, probably tired of being left in the dark.

"Sí, Mijo," mi mamá interjected, and I noticed abruptly we'd been talking right in front of her the whole time. "You mention that—that Héctor was murdered, and that this de la Cruz guy tried to kill you too, and then you run off?!" She shook her head, and I moved to block Miguel with my body. If it wasn't for the vivid concern I could see on her face amidst the confusion, I would have hauled him from the room by now, just in case. That, and the fact that the rest of the familia was now spewing questions as well, obviously bewildered by this new information.

I knew they weren't going to let the matter rest now, at least not easily. "It's a long story. Maybe tomorrow, we can—"

"Why would de la Cruz try to kill Miguel? Is it because he stole his guitar? *Is he haunting him now?*" Abel asked, his eyes wide with fear.

"Did he come back like Héctor did?" Berto glanced between the door and Miguel, probably wondering if the house was still safe.

"It's not like that!" Miguel said, popping his head out from behind me. "We're fine here, it just—"

"I should have done a better job keeping you away from music!" Abuela cried, her hands balling into fists. "If I'd just schooled you at home, then maybe—"

"Mamá, what's done is done." I rubbed my forehead, reaching blindly backwards to grab mi hijo's arm. "And while it has definitely caused some...rifts, in our familia, we can find a place for it if—"

"No! No good can come from music!"

I ground my teeth so tightly that my jaw cracked. "Mamá, that's not true! It can be used to bring people together, and to—"

"Music is a *curse*. It infects your mind, and makes you lose sight of what's really important, like familia!"

"Mamá, that's—"

"I understand why you feel that way, Abuela."

I froze. I didn't notice it before, but all of the questions and remarks seemed to have died down when Mamá and I started arguing, leading to everyone hearing Miguel's words. Miguel's confusing, out-of-character, soft words.

"I—I don't—you—"

Miguel put all the letters into one hand, revealing an old newspaper cutting I hadn't noticed until now. "Tía Victoria, she...she gave this to me, to get back here. And explained to me why you hate music so much."

I watched warily as Miguel stepped to my side, letting my hand fall away. He held out the clipping, and mi mamá reached for it with trembling fingers. I tried to see what was so incriminating about the singular piece of newspaper that it somehow condemned music to eternal hatred, but Mijo was deliberately making sure only Abuela could see the pertinent side.

I was about to just ask what was on the clipping, when Miguel said, "she also told me what...what happened that night. And she has a letter for you." He sorted through his papers for a moment, before handing one over with 'Elena' written on it in tight cursive. Compared to how she took the foto, she practically snatched the letter from Miguel's hand, making him flinch.

I scowled, putting my arm around his shoulders and bringing him closer to me, but said nothing as mi mamá read the letter. It was a good thing too, as I almost jerked back when the first tear fell down her face. Mi mamá was not one for displaying her sorrow so publicly, and I could probably count on one hand the amount of times in my thirty-seven years of life I'd seen her weep like this with the rest of the familia around.

After a few moments of her cries filling the air, Mamá finally took in a deep, shaky breath, taking the hand mi papá offered and gripping it tightly. Gently, like the letter and clipping were delicate flowers that needed to be preserved, she tucked them in her apron pocket, patting them once. Sniffling, she turned to Miguel, and I tensed, wondering what she would say.

"I...words can't describe..." She swallowed, her voice barely a hoarse croak. "*Thank you*, Mijo. I...may I hug you?"

I glanced at Miguel, not sure how he would feel about such a request, but he was already moving forward to wrap his arms around his abuela. I watched them hug, the way they clung to each other, amazed yet again at the forgiving nature of mi hijo. I wondered if I was in his shoes, if I'd have been able to move on as quickly as he had.

After a good minute or so, Abuela pulled away, clearing her throat. "Victoria, did she...?"

"I didn't read the letter, if that's what you're wondering." Miguel fidgeted with the remaining letters in his hands. "I didn't think it was, uhm, right."

Abuela nodded, and though I didn't voice it, I was silently proud of mi hijo for not reading what was clearly a private note. "You...you've been going to la Tierra de los Muertos, haven't you. Every time you disappear."

Miguel nodded to the question-like statement, not even bothering to speak over the loud exclamations of shock and disbelief. He winced at a particularly loud cry from Benny, and I frowned, wondering if his head was healed enough to handle this much noise. I grabbed

his hand, and he looked up at me—

"QUIET!"

The shout made Miguel and I jolt, but it did serve its purpose. Every head at the table shot to the matriarch, who practically had smoke coming out of her ears. "This is the dinner table, not a fútbol game!" She scolded, wagging her finger at everyone. "And you will learn *nothing* if you keep screeching like banshees!"

Mi familia seemed to deflate at her reprimand, shrinking back into their seats. Mi mamá nodded once, and I noticed her shoot a quick glance at Miguel, as if checking that he was okay. It made me wonder if she had noticed that the noise was hurting his head too, and decided to take a more...offensive stance, to solve the problem, rather than my plan to just drag Miguel out of the room.

"There's...there's a lot, that we need to talk about. That I need to tell you." Abuela sighed, and for a moment, she looked for older than she usually did. I sometimes forgot that she was past the age where most people start slowing down, perhaps because that simply wasn't how Mamá was. She was always busy cooking, making shoes, or watching the little ones. So to see her practically wilt under the day's events, her firm, stubborn mask practically shattered, was...eerie, to say the least.

"Abuela, if you don't want to talk about it, I...I won't say anything."

Despite the comforting tone with which they were said, Miguel's words served to only make mi mamá's brows furrow further. "No, Mijo. It's okay. I won't—I *can't* ask you to keep this secret too. And...and you all have the right to know why I've despised music for so long."

"It's...it's not because of Héctor?" Gloria asked, the shock clear in her voice.

"That...is a very small part, I must admit." Mamá pursed her lips, staring at her plate of cold food. "I grew up knowing that I ought to avoid music. But I...I loved the lullabies that Mamá Coco sang to Victoria and I in secret. And I loved the songs in the plaza too much

to stay away, so I'd...I'd sneak out there, sometimes. Victoria and I, we shared a room, and she would cover for me so I could stay out for longer, making sure I didn't get caught.

"And it was wonderful." Her eyes glazed over, a melancholic smile making its way across her face. "I'd make dinero singing, and tell everyone at home I'd earned the pesos shining shoes. I was careful to conceal who I was, and Victoria didn't mind keeping my secret. She could see how much music meant to me, and knew it was my passion. But then..."

She paused, reaching back into her apron to pull out the cutting. She examined it one last time, before turning it over for the whole family to see. I didn't realize what I was looking at at first, but when I did, I gaped.

The picture displayed what I assumed was a young Mamá in the plaza, wearing a beautifully embroidered dress and mask, surrounded by mariachis. The headline, though...

"'Who Is the Mysterious, Enchanting Singer?'" Mamá spoke the words in an empty voice. "In a small town like Santa Cecilia, everyone was curious. And Victoria, she...she came to warn me, when she saw the paper that night after Papá Julio was done with it. We argued as she dragged me home, about me taking a break from visiting the plaza until things had died down. But I—"

Her voice broke, and she inhaled sharply. "I was stubborn, and foolish, and so intent on getting my way that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. And the drunk *músico*, driving his *maldito carro*, would have run me straight over if—if—"

"If Tía Victoria hadn't pushed you out of the way."

Mamá nodded miserably at me, the wrinkles on her forehead deepening. "It all happened so quickly. By the time I regained consciousness, a crowd had formed, and Victoria—she was *gone, and it was my fault—"*

"It wasn't your fault, Abuela." Miguel stepped forward, grabbing her hand. "If there was one thing Tía Victoria wanted you to know, it

was that she doesn't blame you *or* your love of music for what happened that night."

"But if I hadn't been there, Mijo, she wouldn't have come after me!"

"But you couldn't have known that would happen, Mamá." I clasped my hand on her shoulder, finally pushing the shock away enough to react. "That man was to blame, for driving when he couldn't even see what was in front of him."

Mamá glanced between Miguel and I, and I could see hope warring with a deep-seated self-hatred on her face, so I said, "if I told Berto to deliver a pair of shoes, and a drunk driver ran him over, would you blame me? Or the shoes?"

Ignoring Berto's muttered complaints at my analogy, I stared intently at mi mamá, who seemed...conflicted. "Of course not! But —"

"Then you cannot blame yourself *or* music for what happened to Tía Victoria." I looked her straight in her eyes, attempting to instill as much authority in my voice as possible. "And it's not fair to you, or Miguel, or to the rest of the familia to keep pushing music out as a way to—to *punish* yourself for what was never your fault in the first place."

One last tear fell down mi mamá's face. "I...sí. You...you might be right. I will try—" she took a deep, shuddering breath. "I will try to —to soften my heart again, towards music." She turned to mi hijo then, "at the very least for your sake, Mijo."

Miguel smiled, a small and hopeful thing. "Gracias, Abuela. I'd...I'd love to do a duet some time with you, if that's something..." he trailed off, probably wary at the stunned look on mi mamá's face. I opened my mouth to try to diffuse the tension—

Mi mamá *beamed*, the grin on her face bigger than any I'd seen in a long time. "I'd *love that*, Mijo." She said, the hidden hope from before now shining for even the most obtuse person to see.

"Really?"

"Of course, Mijo." I noticed her give his hand a gentle squeeze, and moved away slightly to let them have this moment. "I...I need some time, but then—"

"I'll be practicing, Abuela." Miguel looked happier than he had since he'd shown up in a glowing light what seemed like forever ago now. "And if you have any song requests, I can—"

Mi papá cleared his throat. "I do not like to interrupt, but I think that we all have a lot of questions, sí?" He gestured to the rest of the table, where the rest of the familia were violently nodding their heads. "Perhaps we could discuss what Miguel has to tell us in the living room? If everyone is done eating, that is."

The nods this time were much less aggressive, but everyone seemed to be finished with the meal, even if many of the plates were left half-full. I shot Miguel a look, silently asking if he was up for an interrogation. To my surprise, he straightened, jerking his head down once with a firmness in his eyes that I didn't expect.

'Perhaps he's as ready to get it all out as we are to hear it, though.' I considered as we put the food away and washed the dishes. It all seemed to go a lot quicker than usual, perhaps due to everyone's curiosity egging them on to work faster. In a matter of minutes I was making my way to the living room, only pausing to grab a couple pan dulces and milk, in case Miguel hadn't eaten yet.

'Looks like I came in at just the right moment, too.' I thought, as Miguel went to sit in the corner chair. "Mijo," I called, waiting for him to turn before jerking my head to the loveseat Luisa and I had shared what felt like ages ago. He didn't seem to understand though, and just squinted back at me. "Come sit here, with me." I clarified, setting the food on the end table and patting the cushion next to mine.

"Oh, okay." He walked over, paused, then asked, "what about Mamá though? She usually sits here, with you."

"She can squeeze in here as well if she wants, but she might sit next to the entryway, so that she can hear if Coco cries."

Miguel shrugged, not seeming to understand why I wanted him to sit next to me, but probably not seeing any real reason to argue. I offered him the plate of pan dulce as everyone else found their seats, but he refused, saying he'd eaten not that long ago. I nodded, wondering briefly what kinds of food they had in la Tierra de los Muertos, and if Tía Rosita was who cooked for the familia. If so, I could understand why Miguel would be more keen to eat there.

Settling my arm over Miguel's shoulder, I pulled him back to my side, figuring he could use the physical support. I knew from what I'd been told and deduced that this conversation would not be a pleasant one. I'd been a fool to not have realized that a few days ago, when Miguel had tried to tell the same story he was now, and I'd left him sitting alone in favor of helping my wife.

'But I won't make that same mistake now.' I glanced around the room as the silence began to become heavy, no one knowing quite what to say. 'I will continue to strive to become the papá that Miguel deserves.'

I watched Miguel clear his throat, his hands clenching and unclenching around the hem of his shirt. I rubbed his arm gently, the movement making him relax, if only a bit. "I know you have a lot of questions, and I want to tell you what happened." He glanced at the letters still clutched in his hand, slightly wrinkled now from his grip. "But it's...it's going to sound crazy. I *promise* I'm not lying though! I wouldn't—"

"Miguel, you've been spontaneously disappearing and reappearing in a ball of light after saying some magic words." Rosa leaned forward, her eyebrows steadily climbing higher. "You had a letter from Tía Victoria, and a newspaper clipping of Abuela from, like, fifty years ago. And Papá Héctor, who should definitely be *dead by now*, showed up looking *Abel's age*." She motioned to her brother, her voice more than a little hysterical. "I think whatever explanation you have at this point will be tame compared to what's happened so far."

I blinked, only just truly processing how crazy the last few days have been. I silently prayed that this would be enough insanity to last the next six years, as Miguel said, "ah, sí. When you put it like

that..." He chuckled nervously, glancing down at his hands again before clearing his throat, looking up.

"I guess it's time that I tell you what happened on Día de los Muertos, *after* I stole the guitar."

The Whole Story! (Well, Mostly)

Miguel's POV

"When I took the guitar, I didn't actually go anywhere. At least, not right away." I paused, wondering how best to explain. "I was cursed, so I could see all the skeletons visiting, and they could see me, and —and touch me." I shivered, remembering how scary it was to fall into a grave, and to be rescued by someone who looked at me like I was a monster. "But no one living could. I, uhm. I actually ran right through you and Mamá—" I glanced up at Papá, wincing at his horrified expression—"but it was like I was a ghost or something."

Mi papá frowned down at me, the wrinkles on his forehead heavy. "Mijo, that's—I'm *so sorry*." He wrapped his other arm around me, and I realized I was breathing shakily already, at what was arguably one of the easier and least terrifying parts of that night. Still, I clung to him for a moment, letting his warmth and the weight of his arms remind me that I wasn't still invisible, and that he could see, hear, and touch me again, unlike in some of the nightmares I had.

When I felt a bit calmer, I pulled back, forcing a smile onto my face. "But then I met Papá Julio, and Tíos Oscar, Felipe, Victoria, and Rosita. They brought me over this huuuuge bridge, made of marigold petals, to this big building where Mamá Imelda was."

"Why did Mamá Imelda stay behind?" Abuela questioned, seeming a bit hurt that her abuela didn't visit.

"I kind of had her foto still, from the ofrenda..." I trailed off, remembering how there was practically steam coming out of Mamá Imelda's ears. "Mamá Imelda was furious she couldn't cross over, actually. She even broke a worker's computer." I recalled, wondering if they'd had to pay for it to be repaired.

"But it was only then that I found out I was cursed, and that I

needed a family member's blessing to return to the Land of the Living by sunrise. And Mamá Imelda was willing, but only on the condition that I give up music, which I thought was completely unfair at the time."

I stopped for a second, mentally imagining with growing horror what would have happened if I did give up music. 'Papá Héctor would be...gone. I'd never have met him, or discovered anything about **Cruz**, and Mamá Coco would never have seen her papá again.' I pictured the way Mamá Coco ran into Papá Héctor's arms, how their grito had been so loud it had hurt my head. None of that would have been possible without music.

"Why sunrise?" Rosa asked, bringing me out of my head. "I mean, Día de los Muertos *technically* ends at midnight. And would you have just been, like, a ghost for forever without the blessing, or—ow!" She exclaimed, rubbing her arm where Tía Carmen had hit her with a glare. "I was just wondering. I figured—"

"It's okay," I interrupted before she could get slapped again. As humorous as it was to see her being scolded for once, it was a good, if somewhat dark question. "I would have become a skeleton, actually, like everyone else in la Tierra de los Muertos. Actually, by the end of the night, I could see all of my bones, which was...really freaky."

"Mijo, that's..." Mi mamá trailed off, apparently not sure how to finish the sentence.

I chuckled, adding, "I almost fainted when I first saw my finger bone; Papá Julio had to catch me and slap some sense into me."

The tension in the room seemed to ease at my words, and mi mamá gave me a small smile. Even mi papá laughed a bit, if the slight shaking I felt was to be believed. Almost fainting was embarrassing, and I was sure I'd be teased about it at some point, but I figured with what was to come that I needed to share as many funny moments as possible.

"She actually gave me her blessing with the condition, and I took the blessed marigold. But as soon as I came back here, I took the

guitar again, and ended up right back in the same room before everyone left."

There was a chorus around the room of disbelief, as well as several exasperated laughs. "Yeah, Mamá Imelda felt the same way. And when she wouldn't give me the blessing without the condition, and no one else in the familia would either, I tried to find **Cruz**, because I thought **he** was my great-great-grandfather."

I scowled, wondering how I ever imagined my strong-willed, fierce Mamá Imelda would marry that pompous **diablo**. "I found this skeleton who mentioned that he knew **Cruz**. So I agreed to put his foto on an ofrenda in exchange for getting me to **him**. But, he wasn't as close to **him** as I thought, and we had to get a guitar from Shantytown to win this talent contest to see **Cruz**, and—"

"Ay, Mijo, slow down! Who was this skeleton? Why did he need his foto put up? And Shantytown?" Mi papá pulled away to face me better, his face practically the definition of bewildered. I opened and closed my mouth, realizing that this was going to take a lot longer than I thought.

"The skeleton, he...well, you'll find out who he was later. He needed his foto up, because if you don't get your foto on an ofrenda, you can't cross the bridge to the living world." I frowned, wishing once again that that stupid rule didn't exist. "And Shantytown, it...it's where the skeletons go, when they're not remembered, before the...the Final Death."

"Final...Death? That sounds..."

"Sí," I nodded to Abel, who looked like I'd just told him El Chupacabra was real. "When no one in the living world remembers you, or has passed down your memory, you...you fade away, en la Tierra de los Muertos."

If I thought the mood was sad before, it was positively sorrowful now. "That...that's so awful," Rosa whispered, hugging her mamá tightly. "How could anyone just forget someone like that?"

I winced, and felt mi papá tense, probably having a similar thought.

"It...it happens sometimes, Rosa. Most of the time I think it's because they don't have any more familia, which is...it's hard, en la Tierra de los Muertos, to be alone. And those in Shantytown, they make their own family. It's not very nice looking, but—the skeletons there were kind."

I waited for everyone to process this information. I knew it was a lot to take in, and my throat was starting to feel scratchy, so I figured I'd take a little break while I could. My voice must have started sounding hoarse, because mi papá handed me the milk he'd offered earlier without me saying anything. I accepted it with a quiet thanks, taking a few long sips before handing it back to him to set down.

Noticing everyone's eyes on me again, I continued. "By that point, I'd put on some gunk to make me look like a skeleton, so I blended in pretty well. We actually won the talent show. The, uhm, skeleton and I, that is. But then Mamá Imelda and the others caught up to us, so we had to make a run for it without the tickets to **Ernesto**'s party. And the skeleton, he...

"He never wanted to play music. He was fantastic at guitar, and could dance, and sing, and I...I didn't understand why he avoided it. When he realized I had other family besides **Cruz**, he tried to take me to them, but I ran away from him and Mamá Imelda and snuck into **Cruz**'s party.

"I sang in front of everyone, and **Ernesto** accepted me as **his** great-great-grandson; **he** even flaunted me off to famous people, like I was some sort of show pony." I rolled my eyes, wishing I'd seen the signs earlier. 'Really, the **man** had videos of himself playing everywhere, and everything **he** did was meant to make himself look better. How was I so amazed by **him** that I completely missed how self-centered and fake **he** was?'

I pursed my lips for a moment, wondering if I should mention what happened with the pool, then decided **Cruz** didn't deserve any credit for saving me when **he** tossed me into a ravine later. "And then the skeleton who had helped me showed up, wanting me to put his picture up. He was fading, and he wanted to visit his daughter one last time before..."

I found it hard to even complete the awful sentence, especially now that I knew just how great of a papá that Papá Héctor would have been to Mamá Coco, if he only had the chance. "Anyways, there was this movie playing in **Cruz**'s mansion, and it was just us three. And the skeleton claimed that **Cruz** took his songs, and that they played together, until the skeleton died while trying to return home to his wife and daughter."

Mi papá inhaled sharply, and I could tell by the split second squeeze of my arm that he had realized who the skeleton was. "**Cruz** claimed that **he** used the songs to keep the skeleton's memory alive, but I knew that wasn't the truth, because what the skeleton described was playing out in the movie above us, one I'd seen dozens of times before. The skeleton, he...he was murdered, by **Ernesto de la Cruz**. And...and to keep us from telling anyone, **he** had us thrown into a ravine."

"That's...but didn't he think you were his great-great-grandson?"

I nodded to Abel, who looked a little queasy now.

"That's so messed up."

I snorted, giving the ground a withering look. "Tell me about it. He even took the skeleton's photo, so that he could never see his daughter again." I shook my head, forcing myself to not get sidetracked by cursing out **Cruz**. "The skeleton and I, we got to talking, and...and I found out he was my real tatarabuelo, Papá Héctor."

As I expected, there was a rather loud mix of cries at this revelation as well, making me wince. "Familia, you're going to have to ask one at a time if you want answers."

"How did you not know that the skeleton you had been following around all night was Papá Héctor?!" Rosa threw her hands out wide, her voice a mixture of genuine astonishment and disbelief.

I shrugged, realizing how ridiculous it sounded. "He didn't mention any name besides his own, at least until he moaned in the ravine about never getting to see Mamá Coco again. And, in my defense, I

was trying very hard to make sure he didn't know I had any other family."

"How on earth did you end up finding him though? The odds of running into him in a land full of thousands, if not *millions* of skeletons, it's—it's nearly impossible!"

I cringed, turning to mi mamá. "Actually, that was really just because of Dante."

I almost laughed at the look on mi familia's faces. "That stray you're always feeding? The one who gnaws his own leg?" Tío Berto asked with a scrunched up nose, clearly baffled as to how a dog factored into all this.

"He's actually an alebrije." I grinned, enjoying the gaping jaws at this piece of information perhaps a little too much. "He's got wings and everything over there, which is really cool. Though you should see Mamá Imelda's cat, Pepita..." I shivered. "You do NOT want to get on her bad side! She's so big, Mamá Imelda rides her like a *dragon*."

I let them imagine that for a second, before asking, "are there any more questions? Or—

"Just one, Mijo." Abuela interrupted, staring at me intently. "You mentioned that the skeleton avoided music. But if the skeleton was Papá Héctor..."

"...why did he avoid something he loved?" I finished. She nodded, and I wondered how to answer her when he himself never explicitly told me why. "I...I think he blamed music, in a way, for separating him from his family. He only ever wanted to use it for us, to provide for his familia, so when it led to his death...I think he gave it up."

I shrugged helplessly, not quite sure how to explain the complicated relationship Papá Héctor seemed to have with his passion. "Papá Héctor, he...he played music three times that night: the first time was for a friend, as he faced the Final Death. The second time was for us both, so I could win the talent show, and go home to put up

his photo, so he could see Mamá Coco. And the last time..."

I smiled at the memory of Mamá Imelda spinning across the stage, elegantly maneuvering around security as she sang from the depths of her soul. "It was for Mamá Imelda, actually. She found us in the ravine, and after we told her everything, she agreed to help get Papá Héctor's photo back so he could see Mamá Coco one last time."

Abuela cleared her throat, and I paused as she said, "but Mijo, you...you didn't bring a photo back. And we saw him here, in the Land of the Living."

I forced myself not to scowl as I thought about that incident, knowing it would only make this conversation longer. And truthfully, I was getting tired; it had been a long day for everyone, and it felt like there was still so much left to explain, when I really just wanted to go to bed.

"Mamá Imelda got the foto, and she gave it to me, and I almost got their blessing to go home. But then **Ernesto** had to throw me off the skyscraper, and I dropped the foto *and* lost my favorite jacket." I frowned, realizing I really should ask if anyone in the familia knew what happened—

"**He did *what?!***"

I blinked, surprised at the exclamation from mi papá and the curses coming from the rest of the adults in the room. Even Abel and Rosa looked horrified, staring at me with wide eyes and pale faces.

I turned to mi papá, raising a brow. "I told you that he tried to murder me. Why do you—"

"I thought you meant the ravine! That was bad enough, but for that ***maldito diablo*** *to have you fall to your death?!* Dios mio, when I get to la Tierra de los Muertos—"

"—you aren't going to do *anything*, because I will have *buried* his bones so deep, ***he will never be seen again, so help me—"***

"Uhm, Abuela? Papá?" I cleared my throat, not exactly liking having their flame-filled eyes now on me. "Pepita kind of beat you to it,

actually. As far as I know, **he**'s still trapped under a bell, and will be for a *long time*. Tía Victoria and Rosita showed hundreds of people how **he** tried to kill me, so I don't think anyone is going to be helping **him** any time soon." I grinned, imagining him being trapped for centuries as penance for all of his crimes.

"That...there's some things I didn't mention, like meeting Frida Kahlo—"

"Frida Kahlo—"

"—because they weren't really relevant, but that's about it." I finished, ignoring Rosa's whimpering as she realized I'd gotten to meet her all-time favorite artist. "I came back here, and played *Remember Me* for Mamá Coco so that she'd remember Papá Héctor, and...it worked."

Mi familia thought over what I'd said in silence for a few moments. "And Papá Héctor coming here? And you going there, too? Is that safe...?" Mi mamá interrogated, her lips pursed.

"Papá Héctor was a...well, a fluke." I paused, squinting. "I think. He probably won't be coming back. But as far as I'm aware, the transportation powers have no negative side effects. I need a foto of someone in the familia in order to get to them, but that's about the limit to my ability as far as I can tell."

"So that's how there were two fotos!" Papá shouted. He cleared his throat when I, and everyone else, gave him a look. "There were...Miguel had a second foto, of the one we put up for Mamá Imelda on the ofrenda."

I paused, trying to figure out what he was talking about. "Oh, you mean from when I—sí, Mamá Imelda gave me her copy. She probably wants that back, actually..." I mumbled, mentally reminding myself to return it before I lost it somehow.

"So—so Mamá Coco, she...?"

"She's in la Tierra de los Muertos, sí." I gave Rosa a soft smile, knowing she was close with her as well. "I actually would have

come back sooner today, but Mamá Coco wanted to write each of you letters." I raised my hand, giving the papers a small shake.

"L-letters? Can I—"

"Oh, sí, of course—" I stood up, making a lap around the room to hand out the hand-written notes. "I didn't know how to give them out earlier without sounding, well..."

"Loco?" Rosa chimed up, the insult lessened by the muttered thanks she gave me when I gave her the paper with her own name on it.

I nodded with a sheepish smile, heading back to my seat. "That was part of the reason Tía Victoria told me about...about her death." I shot a glance at Abuela, relieved to see that while she looked sad, my words hadn't made her start crying again. "She wanted to give me proof, so you'd know I wasn't lying."

"And what Miguel said was true, as far as Victoria is aware." Abuela added, smirking when she said, "though you didn't mention that Mamá Imelda can sing, apparently."

I shrugged, though I couldn't help feeling a little giddy as I said, "and she's really good at it, too. I can't wait for you to see—well, I definitely *can wait*—what I mean is—"

"I understand, Mijo." Abuela laughed, leaning back in her chair. Her eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment, and I wondered what she was thinking, till she murmured, "Victoria says she sounds like me."

I swallowed, a tangle of emotions making my chest ache fiercely. 'So many moments lost, all because of a selfish act over a hundred years ago. What would Abuela's life have been like, if Papá Héctor came back? Would she have become a musician too? Would our family profession be music, instead of shoe-making?'

I knew I'd never know, and that it was pointless to think about the 'what ifs', but it was hard not to when there were so many. Still, I mentally shook those thoughts away as I watched mi familia read their letters in silence. I let my eyes fall shut, figuring that I'd explained enough for one night, and that if there were more

questions in the morning, I could answer them then.

'Papá Héctor was right. Again.' I almost snorted at the thought as I leaned more against mi papá, relaxing as he pulled me closer to him. 'It felt good, to tell them what happened.'

My mind brought forth Papá Héctor's visit, and the condition that was broken.

'Well, almost everything. But maybe...maybe some secrets are a good thing.'

A New Beginning

Hello readers! Crazy to think this is the last author's note I started this story over six years ago now, which is kind of crazy to think about, but at last we have reached the end. I hope you enjoyed, and thank you to everyone who stuck it out to the end. If anyone wants to leave one last comment, I'd love to hear what you thought of the story:) Happy Día de los Muertos everyone!

Miguel's POV

'The last few days have been so strange.' I thought, rearranging my fingers around the strings of my guitar. 'First Jake, Diego, and Juan were suspended. Then Papá asks me to play something for Mamá and him on my guitar. And then—' I shook my head, my brain still not quite fathoming what had happened. 'Then—'

"Miguel!" Rosa called, knocking on my door. "It's time for my lesson, right?"

'—*Rosa*, of all people, asked *me* to teach her how to sing.' I told her to come in, scooching over on my bed to make room for her. 'Sure, it was because she doesn't want to look like an idiot the first time she sings in front of others, but still—it's progress!'

"Is there a certain song you want to work on today, or...?"

"I...I want to know the song that Mamá Imelda sang. When you were in la Tierra de los Muertos." Rosa said, her voice as commanding as always. I stared at her, confused. She'd never even heard the song before, so why did she want to—

She swallowed, her fingers clenching and unclenching like mine did when I was trying not to fidget. "I've never gotten to meet Mamá Imelda, but...when the time comes, I want to be able to, uhm..."

"Ah, I—I understand." I cleared my throat, tapping my hand against

my guitar. "Do you want to work on that first, or...?"

"Actually, I've been practicing *Un Poco Loco* while making shoes, and..."

We worked for about an hour before she left, her singing while I played the chords on my guitar. 'It's...fun, to be able to have something to do with her.' I realized, absentmindedly playing the notes to *Remember Me*. 'I don't think we've ever had a shared hobby, and it's cool to be able to teach her what I know. That, and during the lessons Papá—'

"Mijo!"

'Right on schedule.' I thought, forcing a smile onto my face as mi papá came into my room for what felt like the hundredth time in the past seven days. "What's up, Papá?"

"I just finished up in the workshop for the day, and I thought we could go to the plaza together." He grinned down at me, tossing his work apron over his shoulder. "We could maybe get churros to celebrate finding someone to authenticate Papá Héctor's letters."

I thought about the offer for a moment, asking, "can I bring my guitar?" There was almost always someone playing music in the plaza, and it was fun to join them. Sometimes there were even tourists who came playing songs I'd never heard before, and I'd learn how to play them by watching them play.

"I don't see why not. Just be careful not to lose or damage it, Mijo." Mi papá warned with raised eyebrows. I thought that would be kind of difficult to do, considering it would be strapped to my back, but I just nodded rather than pointing this fact out.

I hopped off my bed. "I'm going to the bathroom, but I'll meet you downstairs, okay?" I set my guitar down, moving to the door.

"Sí, Chamaco. I'll see you down there!"

We both left the room, and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief as soon as I closed the bathroom door. Mi papá had been almost stifling in the last week, taking me to and from school, having me sleep in his

bedroom while mamá took my bed, and even asking me to go to the workshop over the weekend to play music while he made shoes.

'I thought I was dreaming when he made that request, and that Abuela would have a fit. But, I think she seemed to like it; she was even smiling when I played a couple of the songs!' I splashed my face with water, idly rubbing the thin dark scab on my face. It didn't actually hurt anymore, it was just annoying having to remember not to pick at it.

I was tempted to mention how...clingy, Papá was being, but decided against it after my conversation with Papá Héctor about it yesterday. 'Laughing in my face at being coddled, the stupid skeleton.' I washed my hands, drying them a bit more forcefully than necessary. 'And then when I asked him how long it would take before Papá calmed down, he just shrugged. At least Mamá Coco said it should only take a few weeks, but still!'

I rolled my eyes, reminding myself to be grateful Papá even let me go to la Tierra de los Muertos. He refused for a few days after hearing about what happened with **Ernesto**, and probably would have said I couldn't go back until I was an adult or something, if the rest of mi familia hadn't chimed in. From there, I'd basically become a glorified mailman, giving letters back and forth between the dead and the living with each visit.

'Not that I really mind.' I thought, putting my guitar on my back. I played with the locket mi papá had given me, with pictures of him and mamá as well as Papá Héctor and Mamá Imelda. 'I get to talk with mi familia on both sides, and I don't have to worry about getting in trouble for disappearing now.'

I greeted mi papá at the door, and we walked off to the plaza together, mi papá asking me about school and lessons with Rosa and how Mamá Coco was doing. It was no small amount of relief I felt when we got to the plaza, and I practically raced over to a group of American tourists.

'Those few weeks better go quickly.' I thought, glancing back to see mi papá speed-walking after me. 'Otherwise I'm going to need to take shelter in la Tierra de los Muertos until Papá remembers that

Socorro is the baby.'

~•~

Three months later

Miguel's POV

'Where am I...?' I looked around, trying to find something I recognized. There were rocks all around me, and water behind me, and stalactites—

I froze, realizing where I was. 'No.' I stared down at my hands, the bones, my bones, trembling. My jacket was in tatters, along with the rest of my clothes. 'This isn't real, I'm not here. I—I got out of here, Mamá Imelda came and got Papá Héctor—'

I turned around, suddenly realizing what was missing. Who was missing. "Papá Héctor!" I shouted, stumbling over the rocky ground. "Papá Héctor, where—"

Crunch.

I leapt back, staring down at the hat I'd accidentally crushed. "No. No, this isn't right." I fell to my knees, gathering Papá Héctor's torn vest and pants into my hands. "I—I saved him, I went back to Mamá Coco in time, and he's fine. He's—I'm—"

I reached up, feeling my face. It was smooth, and cold, and...

I raced over to the water, frantically checking my reflection. I...I was a skeleton, with facial markings that were already fading. My nose was gone, my hair was a mess, and it was all so wrong. 'I'm not actually here, I can't be. I made it home, and I—'

"Miguel!"

I flinched at the booming voice, one I recognized with frightening certainty. "Have you come to your senses yet, and decided to join me as my obedient great-great-grandson? As lovely as this...pit, is, I'm sure you would enjoy yourself much more in my mansion." I stared up at ***Ernesto****, watching as* ***he*** *examined a small tear on* ***his*** *pants with disdain. "What do you say? Willing to make peace and move on yet?"*

I bared my teeth in a growl. "Never. You killed Papá Héctor, and—"

***Ernesto** groaned. "It's been years now, Miguel. You ought to forget about him, like everyone else did. After all, you're not getting out of here until you realize that I did what I had to do to seize my moment, and become the successful man I am today. But until you can grasp that concept..." **He** shrugged, moving away from the edge of the ravine with a fake mournful smile on **his** face.*

"I'll see you again in another few years!"

*I listened to his footsteps becoming quieter and quieter, a mix of relief and terror stirring in my gut. 'No one is ever going to find me here.' I grasped with renewed horror. 'I'm going to be stuck here for the rest of my afterlife, with only **Ernesto** for company. And—and then I'll fade away, with no one ever realizing I tried to get home, just like Papá Héctor. My—my parents will think I hated them, I'll never get to see Socorro grow up, and I—I—'*

I inhaled sharply, bolting upright in my bed. My head moved around so quickly it hurt, but I couldn't be bothered as I took in my surroundings. 'That's my desk, and my backpack, and my guitar.' I tried to calm my racing heart, my whole body trembling despite the warmth of the blankets bundled around me. 'And I—I got the guitar after seeing Papá Héctor, and he was fine, and I talked with him a couple of days ago about his new job, and—and—'

I squeezed my shirt until my fingers cramped, trying in vain to make my body realize that I was safe. It had been a few weeks since I'd had a nightmare this bad, and foolishly, I'd thought they were all over. 'I can eat the foods I liked again, and Abuela and I sang together last week for the first time, so why...why am I still having nightmares? There's nothing I'm worried about anymore, my life is better than it's ever been, and it makes no sense—'

"Argh!" I resisted the urge to pull my hair out as I jumped out of bed, pacing quickly back and forth as I rubbed harshly at my wet eyes. It was barely past midnight, and I was still tired, mostly because I'd stayed up late the last couple of nights playing music in la Tierra de los Muertos. But I also knew I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep now, at least...

'Not without someone's help.' I winced, wondering what I should do. I grasped the locket around my neck tightly, knowing that if I wanted to, I could easily go to la Tierra de los Muertos. Papá Héctor would be okay with me waking him up, and we would have hot chocolate in the kitchen as I told him my nightmare, and he would play *Remember Me* to help me fall back asleep.

'But...would that be right?' I frowned, recalling the deal I made with mi papá a month ago. He'd finally agreed to let me sleep alone in my own room, without him sleeping on the bed next to me, or keeping vigil in my desk chair. The only reason he'd let me, though, was because I *promised* to come to him if I needed anything, or had a nightmare...and couldn't fall back asleep.

I groaned, running my hands through my hair. 'I know I said that, but I thought it wouldn't happen again! I just...kind of assumed that once they were gone, they wouldn't come back.' I paused in my pacing, face-palming. 'Miguel, you've made a lot of stupid assumptions, but this might be the stupidest of them all. What kind of logic—'

'Okay, no. Think.' I eyed my bed, wondering if I should at least *try* to go back to sleep. But then I remembered how I used to get nightmares back to back, and realized that no, I did not want to risk waking up again alone tonight. 'Still, what if...what if Papá didn't *actually* want me to wake him up? What if it was just one of those things people say, like 'we should hang out sometime' or something?'

I took a step towards the door, and another two steps back, before straightening. 'I survived being thrown into a ravine, falling from a skyscraper, and have successfully revealed to the public that Papá Héctor wrote all of the songs that **Cruz** claimed were **his**—I can do this.' I threw the door open, wincing at the loud creak it made.

Making my way down the hall, I couldn't help feeling a sense of deja vu as I avoided the creaky boards. It was a matter of a few seconds for me to reach mis padres' room, and I only paused for a moment before pushing the cracked door open, making my way inside. Tip-toeing over to Papá's side of the bed, I hesitated one last time, and then shook his arm gently, letting go of him quickly.

I couldn't help but flinch slightly as he stirred with a groan, his eyes squinting open. "Mijo? What's—" he blinked rapidly, sitting up so quickly I had to jump back to avoid him hitting me. "Hey, are you okay? Was it a nightmare?" He stood up, completely overreacting as he hoisted me onto his hip.

"Mhmm," I murmured into his neck, wrapping my arms around him. I guess if he wanted to carry me, I wasn't going to complain.

Rosa had given me back my skateboard last week, as a sort of thank-you for all the music lessons, and I had twisted my ankle using it. It didn't hurt as bad as it could have, but it did make walking a bit unpleasant. And of course, because Rosa had seen it happen, she not only took the board back, but she also informed mi papá of what had happened. That meant less trips to the plaza while my leg healed, so more journeys to la Tierra de los Muertos, and exhaustion now due to not being able to sleep.

"Mijo, do you want anything to eat or drink? Maybe some pan dulce, or warm milk?"

I looked up at him, considering his question. "No thanks. I think—" my mouth widened as I yawned, before resting my head back on mi papá's shoulder. "I just want to go back to bed."

"Alright, Mijo." Mi papá whispered back, turning away from the staircase and heading to my room. "Do you want to talk about your nightmare?"

I tensed, which mi papá must have felt, because he rushed to add, "you don't have to, Miguel. Not if you don't want to. I know that it helps you, though, to talk about them."

He pushed open the door to my room as I considered what he said. It was true that when I talked about my dreams after having them, I was less likely to have another nightmare that night, which was another reason I was keen on going to him or Papá Héctor. But I also knew that on some level, it hurt mi papá to be reminded of what I went through, and of how I had struggled to make my way back.

Mi papá sat down on my bed, rearranging me so that I was sitting in his lap. Abruptly, I remembered doing the same thing with Papá Héctor what felt like years ago now. It was kind of strange, now that I thought about it, how similar the two seemed to act despite having personalities that were completely different, and having never met each other.

'Well, not really, that is.' I corrected myself, figuring that the 'Saturday night disaster', as I'd mentally dubbed it, didn't count. 'But otherwise—'

"Miguel, would you like to talk about it?" Mi papá asked again, his voice gentle. "Otherwise, I could sing the lullaby for you, if you like."

I forced myself to look up at him, and to examine his face. There was no impatience hiding in his wrinkled forehead, or anger in his soft smile. I searched for some sort of negative emotion, but besides maybe some fatigue, he seemed to genuinely be asking for my opinion on what I wanted to do, which...

"I...I was in the ravine again." I whispered just loud enough for him to hear. "And—and Papá Héctor was *gone*, and I'd been there for *years*, and the only one who knew I was there was ***Cruz***. I was never going to get out, or get to see mi familia again, and I—" my voice cracked, and I couldn't quite swallow the lump in my throat as fresh tears fell down my face.

"Oh, *Mijo*." Mi papá sounded so sad as he pulled me to his chest, his squeezing bridging on being painful. "You're not there. And—and if you were lost, whether in this world or the next, your familia would never stop looking for you."

He pulled back, looking me straight in my eyes.

"I would never stop looking for you, Mijo."

His words made me cry even harder as I violently nodded, wrapping my arms around him again. One of his hands went to my back, rubbing smooth circles, while the other cupped the back of my head, holding me against him. It was warm, and I could hear his

heartbeat, and smell his cologne, and it all reminded me that I wasn't dead, and that I had made it back home all those months ago.

If you asked me how long I cried, I wouldn't be able to say. Eventually the tears stopped coming, leaving me sniffling and hiccuping, with my head feeling like it was stuffed with cotton. Mi papá had laid down at some point, wrapping my blanket around the both of us and moving my hands gently to his chest.

They were cramping now, though, so I moved them again, letting them rest on the bed on either side. "Thank you, Papá." My voice was so hoarse I hardly recognized it. "For...for being here."

"Of course, Mijo. I'm..." He paused, then said, "thank you for coming to me. For trusting that I would gladly comfort you."

I nodded against his chest.

"I did promise."

He chuckled.

"Well, yes. But you never did say how Papá Héctor came here last time, or what the condition was that you broke—"

I froze, my fingers clenching around the bed sheet against my will.

"—so I wasn't sure if he'd magically show up, if you ever wanted him here badly enough."

I relaxed a bit, realizing mi papá wasn't actually questioning me right now. He'd mentioned the condition a few times over the last three months, but never outright asked about it. Although, that could have been because whenever he brought it up, I tried to change the subject, leave the room, and even one time just said I had to give a letter to Mamá Imelda and transported myself away from the conversation. After that particular incident, well...

"I know you don't want to tell me what the condition is. And I appreciate you telling me there was one, when you didn't tell the rest of the familia." Mi papá began running his fingers through my

hair, and I breathed in deeply, letting myself relax even further.

"I just...I want to know—is there any chance he'll come back again? To the Land of the Living?"

I blinked, recalling all that had changed in the last three months. Mis tíos had started having favorite songs, and requesting certain ones whenever I practiced in the living room. Rosa and I were talking more, and even Abel seemed interested in learning an instrument. Either mi papá or mamá, and often both, were at every meal, and set aside time each week to spend doing various activities with me. And Abuela hadn't even raised her voice at me in the last few months, let alone taken off her chancla.

"No, Papá. He...he did what he needed to, I think."

"...ah. And...the condition? It can't be broken again?"

I let my eyes fall shut with another yawn, my mind slowly turning over his question as my body became heavy. It was hard to process, but it...it felt important. Papá sounded serious, so I answered as well as I could, before I completely fell asleep.

"Not even if I tried."